Henry Miller as a clown on the French first edition of
The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder.

Karl Orend

Henry Miller's Angelic Clown

Reflections on
The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder

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Introduction

Henry Miller's Angelic Clown was written at high speed, over a period of two weeks. As with all of my previous work on Miller, composed during the last three years, it was written whilst I was living in constant insecurity and under conditions that can only be said to resemble those that Miller lived through whilst writing *Tropic of Cancer*. Many of the Miller-related texts I have published have appeared without revision or adequate proofing—simply because I was desperate to publish them to raise enough money just to fulfill obligations to my young daughter, Scarlet Marie, and to pay daily expenses and eat. This obviously means that they do not represent the kind of finished work that I would like to contribute to Miller scholarship, but rather the best I can do under conditions of extreme poverty and distress. As Miller once remarked, how can you write a masterpiece when you are constantly afraid someone is going to pull the chair out from under you ass? It is impossible to convey to anyone who has not experienced it the constant depletion of emotional and creative energy (and abject frustration) experienced by a writer writing under conditions of total insecurity as far as his daily life is concerned. For the writer working under such conditions, his main problem, apart from practical needs, is that he can never write the work he is capable of writing, because he never has the peace of mind or repose to give of his best. Texts are published uncorrected and unrevised and, through exhaustion, he misses typos and fails to explore all the material he would like to. Imagine that Henry

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Miller had published *Tropic of Cancer* in 1931, and not had the benefit of over two years of time and maturation to rewrite the book twice before it appeared from Obelisk Press, in 1934. If he had been forced to print the book in 1932, and not had the emotional, practical and financial support of Anaïs Nin, then *Cancer* would have born little relation to the masterpiece we know. It would have been a vastly inferior book, even though his genius would have held within him the capacity to revise *our text* into existence.

I first read *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* twenty years ago, in the Hallmark edition, whilst I was living in Nottingham, and helping to found the Haggs Farm Preservation Society—an organization intended to save the farm where D.H. Lawrence first had the urge to write from imminent destruction (Haggs Farm is Miriam's farm in *Sons & Lovers*). I read Miller's book one weekend whilst staying at the house where Lawrence lived as a young boy (the Breach House on Garden Road), which I was decorating with photos of famous authors to help out the man who had saved it from dereliction, my friend Ken Roberts. *Smile* has always seemed to be one of Miller's most neglected and misunderstood books. Most of his admirers, biographers and critics barely even mention it. Yet, as this study will show, there is much to be said about Auguste's story. It remains an important text in tracing the development of Miller's ideas on religion and on the artist/writer as essentially a religious figure - one who is divinely inspired. My book also briefly explores Miller's profound debt to visual arts and music in his writing. It highlights the importance of other writers/artists (in this case Wallace Fowlie and a group of painters) in acting as a catalyst for Miller's own writing—much as Michael Fraenkel, Luis Buñuel and Georges Duhamel had done for *Cancer*.

Another reason for my interest in *Smile* is my own love of the circus, and of many of the works Miller drew upon for the composition of his clown text (especially Miró, Rouault and Seurat). I first visited Jerry Cottle's circus at the age of five, with

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my father. After this experience, I attended whenever I could. I also recall seeing many circus acts on television, especially from the Moscow State Circus and Chinese State Circus. My favorite song as a child was *Tears of a Clown*. Years later, in Paris, I translated regularly for *Cirque de Soleil*. One of my favorite buildings in Paris is the Cirque d'Hiver. Clowns have always fascinated me—from Auguste clowns, Buster Keaton and Max Wall, through rodeo clowns, Jacques Tati and Austin's own favorite drunk, Shakes the Clown. I envy clowns their anonymity. In the world of the circus ring I, like Miller, find an echo of happier times—of a divine and harmonious world, outside of time, filled with joy.

This book is dedicated to certain dear friends who have helped sustain me through very difficult times. They have resisted the urge to judge me or to tell me, as so many have, that I am wasting my life by writing. They do not suggest, as others do, that I am a failure because I am poor. I think of Vladimir Nabokov's comment on Nikolai Gogol—a writer, living in permanent poverty, "because he could not tear himself away from his life work in order to earn a living… constantly pestered by impatient people rebuking (him) for his slowness." My debt to my true friends is without end. This book is also dedicated to my children, whom I love and miss every day of my life. And to Amy and Brayden—for reasons they know only too well.

Karl Orend

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Dedication

For

My dear friends

Rémy Deshayes & Patrick von Richthofen

For

My children

Hannah, Johann & Scarlet Marie

&

For

Amy & Brayden
(Who love clownfish).

A clown is a poet in action. He is the story he enacts.

—*Henry Miller*

Circus performers are emancipated beings. For them, the world is not what it seems to us. They see with their eyes. They live in the moment fully, and the radiance that emanates from them is a perpetual song of joy.

—*Henry Miller*

"I never heard of a writer being a clown too," was my mother's sententious, asinine remark. At this point anyone else would have given up. Not Mona. She amazed me by her persistence. This time she was all earnestness. (Or was she exploiting this opportunity to convince me of her loyalty and devotion?) Anyway, I decided to let her have full swing. Better a good argument, whatever the risk, than the other sort of lingo. It was revivifying, if nothing more.

"When he acts the buffoon," said Mona, "it's usually because he's been hurt. He's sensitive, you know. Too sensitive."

"I thought he had a pretty thick hide," said my mother.

"You must be joking. He's the most sensitive being alive. All artists are sensitive."

—*Henry Miller*
(Nexus)

At bottom I sensed in others distrust—an uneasiness, an antagonism which, because it was instinctive, was irremediable. I should have been a clown; it would have afforded me the widest range of expression. But I underestimated the profession. Had I become a clown, or even a vaudeville entertainer, I would have been famous. People would have appreciated me precisely because they would not have understood; but they would have understood that I was not to be understood. That would have been a relief, to say the least.

—*Henry Miller*
(Nexus)

Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.

The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.

—*Mark Twain*

You do not enter into paradise tomorrow or the day after or in ten years; you enter paradise today, when you are poor and crucified. Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.

—*Léon Bloy*

In Jesus on the Cross, the clown, if he dare, also sees the puppet string of a divinity, who is going to rot, to crumble in the wind and dance on the jig…. One may parody the divine—one does not caricature it without dissipating its divine quality, the way one dissolves a speck of amber in a tubful of laundry.

—*André Suarès*

God has a ladder reaching from heaven right down to earth. The Holy Archangels put it up…and as soon as God steps on the first rung, all the evil spirits fall back headlong and sink in droves down into the depths of Hell.

—*Nikolai Gogol*

First published by Duell Sloan & Pierce in 1948, Henry Miller's *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* is seemingly, though not in reality, his most atypical book. Written to accompany a series of forty clown and circus drawings by Fernand Léger, who subsequently rejected it, this short text has since appeared with illustrations from a variety of artists, including Miller himself. *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* is a parable in the form of the story of Auguste, a famous clown. The *New York Times Book Review* described it as "a simple, decorous, and somehow devout tale."[1] Although many of Miller's admirers have never read this book, it has passed, under the New Directions imprint alone, through at least twelve printings. The text retains, to a degree, as the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* once remarked, "the magic of mystery, for which each reader must find his own clues and supply his own solution."[2]

Henry Miller wrote a short Epilogue to *Smile,* in which he explained the genesis of Auguste's story. This was the first time Miller had attempted a book in the style of a certain French *livre d'artiste*, in which he had to write a text to accompany existing drawings by a painter. Miller felt "inhibited" and was not able to begin until two months after he agreed to the commission. In all of Miller's previous writing he had been firmly in control. He had set both the tone and direction. Henry began the *Smile* text in the aftermath of compiling another form of *livre d'artiste* with his friend Bezalel Schatz, entitled *Into the Night Life*. Miller and Schatz manufactured this book using silkscreen in 1946-7, after taking lessons from nuns at a local convent. Henry Miller had worked in tandem with Schatz to create a holograph text and paintings based on material that he

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had originally written for *Black Spring*, back in 1933.

When Henry Miller began *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, he was already obsessed with images of the circus in Paris-based art and literature, thanks to his four-year correspondence with French literature critic, Wallace Fowlie—who used circus and clown images frequently in his writing. The word "clown" appears in almost all of Miller's major works. Miller was also familiar with many artistic depictions of clowns and circuses—such as works by Georges Rouault, Joan Miró, Marc Chagall, Max Jacob, Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder, Marcel Duchamp and Georges Seurat. Miller had been painting in earnest himself since 1927. In 1928, he had even considered becoming primarily a painter. He held his first art show at June Mansfield's Roman Tavern that year. He subsequently exhibited widely over the decades, even winning the Jerusalem International Art Prize. Circuses and clowns were among Miller's favorite themes to paint. He produced many paintings on these subjects, including: *Antoine the Clown* (1940), *Cirque Medrano* (1943), *Two Clowns* (1949), *Circus* (1952), *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (1954), *A Clown* (1954), *Le Clown* (1954), *Nude & The Clown* (1962), *Clownesque* (1963), *The Joker Clown* (1966), *Cirque* (1968), *The Laugh Clown* (1969), *Circus* (1973), and *Sun & Clowns* (1979). Probably, many more clown paintings remain un-catalogued. Looking back on his commission from Léger, Miller remarked that he wished he had been asked to provide circus paintings for a book, rather than a text.[3]

Henry Miller received picture proofs from Fernand Léger in early 1947. Léger had, like Miller, been obsessed with circus since childhood. He regularly visited the Cirque Medrano in Paris with friends such as Blaise Cendrars, Guillaume Apollinaire and Max Jacob (Miller, Picasso and Toulouse-Lautrec were among other regulars at the Medrano). Léger was a close friend of three famous clowns—The Fratellini Brothers. He even designed clown costumes. From 1946-1954 much of Léger's work was based on circus and clown imagery—culminating in his book *Le Cirque*

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(1950—the publication for which Miller was commissioned) and one of his masterworks—"The Great Parade" (1953/4 variants).

Henry Miller eventually began to write *Smile* after stashing Léger's artwork in a drawer, because he found it too distracting. The story came to him as if by dictation, "blindly, not knowing what would come next." Miller drew inspiration from Miró (the ladder image and the dog from Miró's painting entitled "Dog Barking at the Moon"). He was also inspired by the story of Jacob from the Bible (via Fowlie's *Jacob's Ladder* and the "Walking Up and Down in China" section of *Black Spring*, which was on his mind because of his recent collaboration with Bezalel Schatz).

Since the 1920s Henry Miller had been fascinated with the life and writing of Nikolai Gogol, whose book *Dead Souls* was the major literary source behind *Moloch*. Gogol was obsessed with the Orthodox Christian image of a ladder leading to Heaven. He even died begging for a ladder so that he might ascend, and be united with God. These ladder images from the Russian tradition (including Dostoevsky) also played a role in inspiring Miller's story. The idea of the white horse in *Smile* came in part from one of the drawings Léger had mailed him, from his own memories of the Cirque Medrano in Paris, the paintings of Seurat, Picasso's stage designs for the ballet *Parade*, and from the section of *Black Spring* entitled "The Angel is my Watermark," which brought together images of a horse and an angel. This image combination also alludes to the association of both the Buddha and Christ (not to mention many good heroes) with a white horse. Other echoes in *Smile* include Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (*Engel: es ware ein Platz, den wir nicht wissen… etc.*) and several religious paintings Miller knew of, dating from the Middle Ages, which revealed the *Scala Paradisi*, explored by Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade, and painted by Pablo Picasso, in his 1930 *Crucifixion* (Christian Heck *L'Échelle céleste dans l'art du Moyen Age* Flammarion Paris 1999).

The ladder image became central to Christianity, because of the accounts of a ladder propped against the Cross Jesus died

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upon at Golgotha. The first major written work using this image of "The Ladder of Divine Ascent" or "Ladder of Paradise" (after the Bible) had been *La Scala* of John Climacus, written circa AD 600.[4] Some claim that Jesus was forced to ascend a ladder to be nailed to the cross. Whether this is true, or whether he was raised up already nailed to the cross, the ladder is universally accepted as one of the Emblems of the Passion.[5] Mohammed also ascended a golden ladder to the Heavens to converse with earlier Prophets and be initiated into the mysteries of creation and God's divine plan. The ladder image is similarly fundamental to Judaism (Genesis 28:11 from whence Christianity and Islam developed their symbol)—in which tradition there is a ladder extending from the earth and through our corporeal body to God in Heaven. The Judaic ladder has four rungs representing different elements of our being: sensation, emotion, intellect and will. Henry Miller's choice of ladder imagery for this short book was, in part, an attempt to locate a universal symbol, which could be used to transcend religious barriers or differences between the Judeo-Christian, Muslim and Hindu/Buddhist traditions.

Henry Miller subsequently wrote that the spirits of several artist-writers accompanied him as he composed *Smile*. Each of them had strong associations with Paris and the circus. Miller was long since familiar with the work of all these men and had an interest in both their paintings and prose writings. Max Jacob, for example, was the dearest friend of Miller's close friend Conrad Moricand, with whom Miller was in regular touch at the time of writing *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. Picasso's bust of Max Jacob, Moricand's friend and colleague at the *Bateau Lavoir*, is entitled *The Jester* (1905). It was modeled on a circus clown. Moricand traveled to Big Sur in December 1947 for the disastrous visit later described in *A Devil in Paradise*.[6] Miller had, of course, lived on the Villa Seurat, named after the painter, from September 1934 to June 1939. Henry had been fascinated by Seurat's paintings of the Cirque Medrano and "La Grande Jatte" in Paris since the early 1920s. He had often discussed them with

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Emil Schnellock. Miller later saw Seurat's work in the *Louvre*.

In 1923, Walter Pach, one of Heinrich Miller's best customers at his tailor shop, had published a monograph with Duffield & Company in New York, entitled simply *Georges Seurat*. It was Pach who translated Élie Faure's *History of Art*. He thus introduced Miller to one of his most important artistic and literary influences and greatly enriched his knowledge of world art across the millennia. Miller read Pach's book on Seurat (which mentions Faure repeatedly) the year it was published. Revealingly, Pach emphasizes Seurat's debt (and that of Van Gogh, another of Miller's fetish artists) to Oriental, especially Japanese, art, which Miller loved. Japanese prints, from the "Floating World" style, adorned the walls of Henry and June's home at 91, Remsen Street. Miller drew upon their images extensively in his writing.

Walter Pach wrote:

> If Seurat himself remains a European in his vision of nature, his color and also his design show a debt to the aesthetics of the East.

He pointed out that:

> Seurat's return to a schematic and intellectual style, as revolutionary as it seemed at the moment when sensation and sentiment were most in vogue, represents only a turn in a cycle of tradition to which his classical spirit made him adhere so strongly.

Exactly the same comment could be made about Miller's writings of the 1930s, which were rooted in the classical tradition of writers such as Petronius, Dante, Rabelais, Jonathan Swift and Cervantes, not to mention their contemporary French and Spanish descendents, such as Blaise Cendrars, L.F. Céline and Luis Buñuel.

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Georges Seurat often discussed art in musical terms. He once wrote:

> Art is harmony. Harmony is the analogy of contrary elements and the analogy of similar elements of tone, color, line, considered according to their dominants and under the influence of light, in gay, calm or sad combinations.

Such techniques of counterpoint in composition, leading to synthesis, are clearly apparent in Miller's prose. Pach also likened the design of Seurat's painting "La Grande Jatte" to the compositions of the architects and sculptors of French Gothic cathedrals. The cathedral image was at the center of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and (via Proust and Goethe) Miller's writing (hinted at most openly in the Dijon chapter of *Tropic of Cancer*). This conceit was a natural development from the influence of John Ruskin on all three men. Pach identified "La Cirque" as Seurat's "greatest masterpiece."

Henry Miller almost certainly read Roger Fry's famous essay on Georges Seurat, published in *The Dial*, September 1926. In this essay Fry discussed Seurat's technique of composition for "La Grande Jatte." His description reminds of the style of Miller's major books, perhaps most notably *Tropic of Cancer* (Miller alludes to Fry on page one of *Cancer*) and *The Rosy Crucifixion*:

> Grande Jatte was created by assembling innumerable separate studies, an assembly in which everything took its place according to the principles of harmony, which Seurat had elaborated.

Roger Fry, like Walter Pach, compared Seurat to a composer, while differentiating his style from the way a melody might

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appear, instinctively and without forethought, to a musician. Fry saw in Seurat, as many writers would in Miller, a reconciliation of opposites—the Janus-faced/schizophrenic nature of the universe, the tug of good and evil and the cycles of creation and destruction—the Oriental yin/yang.

Henry Miller described the clown as "a poet in action. He *is* the story which he enacts."[7] Miller revealed, in his Epilogue to *Smile*, that he identified the clown as a religious figure, who relives a form of Calvary in his performances: "It is the same story over and over—adoration, devotion, crucifixion." This was a continuation of the European clowning tradition of Pierrot (the sad clown/*Pierrot de la mort*) who is readily identified with Christ, scourged, the constant victim of cruelty, persecution and misunderstanding. Miller had been greatly marked by a version of the Pierrot legend from Russian literature—Leonid Andreyev's *He Who Gets Slapped*, which was made into a film that Miller knew well. Andreyev is another underestimated influence on Miller. It should not be forgotten that when Miller placed a massive desk in the home he shared with Beatrice Wickens, and tried to write, while placing chairs all around for his imaginary characters, he was aping a story of Andreyev. The echoes of Miller's own life's work, and especially *The Rosy Crucifixion* are immediately apparent in his description of the clowns' performance as a "crucifixion." Writing *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* came easily to Miller, except for the conclusion, which he reworked many times. He described how "I wanted my protagonist to go out like a light. But not in death! I wanted his death to illuminate the way." Miller's identification of his character Auguste with a Christ, "The Light of the World," who illuminates the "way" by his death, is clear. Miller believed that his clown story had universal import; it

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was hardly a throwaway piece. The death of his clown was not an end, but rather a beginning:

> When Auguste becomes himself life begins—
> and not just for Auguste but for all mankind.

Henry Miller emphasized repeatedly that the story of Auguste was not planned or constructed. It came of its own volition, as much of his Surrealistic and sexual writing would. The process of creation was dictation, from "the Voice," referred to in *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*. It was akin to surrealistic automatic writing. Although the methodology was recognizable, the story and its message were far from being "a surrealistic document." Miller stressed that the text was vitally concerned with recounting the fundamental truth of life, as he had come to believe it to be. This was also the first book that Henry Miller had written whose characters had no conscious model in anyone he had met or known. It was, rather, subconsciously rooted in art, in circus performance, and in music—in images buried deep within the recesses of his mind, some of which stretched back to his childhood, when he had visited circuses with his mother at Ulmer Park, or to his early days in Paris. The story of Auguste was the expression of a mystical vision. Miller believed it was divinely inspired.

The role of the clown, Henry Miller believed, was to teach us to laugh at ourselves with "a laughter born of our tears." The clown is a figure "separated from the world by laughter."[8] He is identified, by Miller, as a religious and symbolic figure that hides behind a mask of "mirthless laughter" in order to bring us into step with our own humanity and deepest repressed feelings. Like the jester or Pierrot or Shakespeare's Fool, his comedy and mirth are a conceit used to awaken our consciousness of the divine flow—and to reassure us, on the purely individual and intuitive level, in the midst of our isolation and pain. The clown can assume our pain for us and

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express what we would not dare. He resembles an angel or Christ, or even the Wandering Jew. The clown can be a purveyor of a cold hard truth or savage vision, which he makes palatable to us by a veneer of comedy.

As Terry Pratchett once wrote:

> No clowns were funny. That was the whole purpose of a clown. People laughed at clowns, but only out of nervousness. The point of clowns was that, after watching them, anything else that happened seemed enjoyable. It was nice to know there was someone worse off than you. Someone had to be the butt of the world.

In his identification of the clown as a figure assuming (like Christ) the pain and suffering of the world, Henry Miller reveals one of the most important keys to understanding his own auto-novels. We find passages of base comedy and highly charged eroticism in Henry Miller's books, such as *Tropic of Capricorn*, *Black Spring*, *Sexus* or *The World of Sex*. Miller's auto-hero assumes all the sins of the world by methodically and calculatedly breaking (symbolically, rather than in real life as some imagine) each of the Ten Commandments. He eventually undergoes his own Calvary and Rosy Crucifixion through the death of his ego. Scenes of heightened sexuality and extreme and brutal comedy are regularly witnessed in books and plays in the Romance, Picaresque and Carnavalesque traditions (such as Petronius, Aretino, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Rabelais, John Ford, the Earl of Rochester, de Sade or Jonathan Swift) in which Miller wrote. Comedy and sexuality were also an important element of the vaudeville and burlesque theater, and of the Grand Guignol, that Miller loved. These interludes of brutality, sex and comedy in Miller's writing provide the reader or spectator with relief from questions of profound emotional and intellectual import—

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just as the clowns' antics do in the circus; or the miracles of Christ do in the New Testament. They allow us to tap into a reservoir of human strength—moments of "no mind" or of wonder, freed from intellectualism and social fear and conformity. This generates a state of freedom which can be traced back to our instinctual pagan life, of which the circus forms a microcosm. These scenes can also allow us to shed our suffering via the conduit of a Sin Eater. Miller would describe such diversions in *The World of Sex* as akin, (unequivocally) in intent, to the miracles of Christ in the Gospels. By linking the clown and Christ, Miller reveals his faith in Rabelais' "Holy Bottle" and the importance of laughter in liberating us and asserting our movement towards divinity. Laughter can set us free. It sets us free by engaging us in a rhythm of natural internal music, outside of all intellectual, mental and societal constraints. It restores to us our humanity and our state of "no-mind." It offers liberation from taboos and suspends both disbelief and the Judeo-Christian notion of linear time, which imprisons us. Laughter brings us to a point of timelessness or harmony, in which the ego is subsumed in the flow of life. It gives us both better perspective and community with each other and with greater forces outside of our daily life. Laughter is an assault on tyranny in all its forms.[9]

Henry Miller would describe joy as being "like a river—it flows ceaselessly." That is why he would write in *Tropic of Cancer*, "I love everything which flows." He associated flow and joy and music with the divine. He spoke constantly of movement and of rhythm. The art form dearest to Henry Miller was music, which he saw as a potentially near perfect expression of flow; it is, he believed, the closest art form to God. Like Goethe and Proust, Miller would associate great architecture with "frozen music."[10] He loved the music he found in the language of Romain Rolland, of Proust and Élie Faure. Like Céline, Miller loved dance and opera. Céline would (like Miller) fall in love with a professional dancer (June and Anaïs danced professionally). Céline would write ballets. Unable to compose a

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ballet, Miller would imitate the forms of music and ballets he admired in his prose. Henry Miller's auto-novels often show a debt to contemporary musical form that is unrecognized. *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* was, for Henry Miller, emotionally linked to Arnold Schoenberg's *Jacob's Ladder* (a vast work drafted and performed in fragments, but not completed), which the composer had based on a book that profoundly influenced both him and Miller—Balzac's *Séraphita*.[11] Schoenberg wrote an essay called "Heart and Brain in Music" in 1947. It links, as does Miller, Balzac and Jacob from the Bible. Written shortly before Miller composed *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, we cannot be certain if Miller was aware of it, though there are parallels, which suggest he might have been—probably through a mutual friend of Miller, Cendrars and Schoenberg, the composer Darius Milhaud, who visited Miller in Big Sur (1947-8).

Schoenberg wrote:

> The unity of musical space demands an absolute and unitary perception. In this space, as in Swedenborg's heaven (described in Balzac's *Séraphita*), there is no absolute down, no right or left, forward or backward . . . To the imaginative and creative faculty, relations in the material sphere are as independent from directions or planes as material objects are, in their sphere, to our perceptive faculties. Just as our mind always recognizes, for instance, a knife, a bottle, or a watch, regardless of its position and can reproduce it in the imagination in every possible position, even so a musical creator's mind can operate subconsciously with a row of tones, regardless of the way in which a mirror might show the mutual relations, which remain a given quantity.

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These comments echo Miller's own symbolic use of the crab symbol in *Tropic of Cancer* and his adoption of the technique of Spiral Form. It is hardly surprising, given Miller's preoccupation with musical symbolism, that from *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, Antonio Bibalo would eventually make one of Miller's most musically oriented texts into an opera (1962).[12] It has been performed in Italian, French, German, and Norwegian.[13]

The reason that Balzac and *Séraphita* were so much on Miller's mind in 1947, when he began *Smile*, was that he had discovered the book through Conrad Moricand, with whom he was corresponding extensively. Miller's two essays on Balzac had been (in 1941) due to be published by Knopf as a separate book dedicated to Moricand. The discovery of *Séraphita* was such an important event for Miller that he once wrote to Moricand that he wanted to kiss the hand of the man who had given him the book—a man to whom he would be eternally indebted. In 1947, Miller invited Moricand to live the rest of his life in Big Sur almost exclusively out of gratitude for the richness that this work by Balzac, and its companion volume *Louis Lambert*, had brought to his life.

Théophile Gautier had once written of *Séraphita*:

> Never did Balzac so nearly approach or grasp ideal beauty as in this book, that mountain ascension to something ethereal, supernatural, luminous, which lifts us above this earth. The only two colors employed are celestial blue and snow-white, with some nacreous tints for shadows.

Almost an identical description could be given of Chagall's painting "The Dream of Jacob," which influenced Miller's *Smile*. The description could also refer to a clown, alone in the spotlight, climbing a ladder to the heavens.

Henry Miller's two Balzac essays and *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* are companion pieces born of Miller's friendship with

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Conrad Moricand and Miller's encounter with painters Moricand had long known as friends or contacts in Montmartre, such as Max Jacob, Pablo Picasso, Georges Rouault, Fernand Léger and Marc Chagall.[14] Schoenberg's comments on the nature of Swedenborgian space and music have affinities with Miller's own writing, notably in his use of the Chinese crab symbol in *Tropic of Cancer* and his distortions of space and time in *Black Spring*.[15] Swedenborg was deeply influenced by Hindu and Buddhist ideas, which were filtered through his teachings and other translations of Indian religious texts into the American Transcendentalism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, to which Miller was also indebted. Miller had studied Swedenborg extensively for four years during his youth. In *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller would write that the hero was "timelessness." Oswald Spengler had told Miller in *The Decline of the West* that the ideal conception of timelessness was the Hindu. In some of his works, Miller would create prose sections that resemble the tone poems or free improvisations of music he admired, such as the piano works of Scriabin, the jazz rhythms of Louis Armstrong or Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

In a little-known (unpublished) essay from 1939, called "The Magnetic Poles," Henry Miller wrote:

> *Black Spring* was a sort of musical notation in alphabetic language of a new realm of consciousness, which I am only now beginning to explore.

There are many musical references in *Black Spring*, notably when Miller identifies himself as The Immortal Kotchei from Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* was another prose exploration of musical notation and form. Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, which Miller knew well and alluded to in *The Rosy Crucifixion,* is the story of a puppet-like man or clown, buffeted by the world. *Petrouchka* was, like Miller's *Moloch*, heavily indebted to Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*.

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Part 2

Henry Miller spoke of joy as being "like a river—it flows ceaselessly." This was the essential message of the clown, "that we should not stop to reflect, compare, analyze, possess, but flow on and through, endlessly, *like music*. This is the gift of surrender, and the clown makes it symbolically." Surrender or acceptance in the Buddhist and Hindu sense (entering the flow of the River of Life leading to the Ocean of Bliss) was a central theme of all of Miller's mature work. So was his use of flowing spirals and his technique of Spiral Form. He derived this conceit from ancient Hindu religious teachings, via A.P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883).[16] A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* is a seminal text of Theosophy. Miller had read *Esoteric Buddhism* in the Brooklyn Public Library around the age of 21. He reread it in 1938, as a gift from David Edgar. The title of the book was misleading because the book contained teachings Sinnett had learned from the Mahatmas, Wise Men in India (where he lived), whom he called the Buddhas because Buddha is an Indian term meaning "wise or enlightened one." The doctrine revealed within was a theosophical explanation of the universe in the light of Hindu teaching. Buddhism had been based in this. The underlying tenet of Sinnett's book is Hindu. Sinnett also calls this doctrine Spiritual Science, with its obvious overtones of Christian Science—a religion with which Miller was deeply familiar, and to which he was very sympathetic in his Big Sur years. Mary Baker Eddy had published *Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures* in 1875, eight years before

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Sinnett's work appeared. Sinnett would also write a book on Mesmerism (with its further connection to Christian Science), one on the Occult and another on Karma, plus a sequel to *Esoteric Buddhism* entitled *The Growth of the Soul*, with its Hamsunian overtones. The influence of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, Transcendentalism and Christian Science is everywhere evident in Sinnett and Miller's writings.[17] Christian Science (deeply indebted to Hinduism) was much on Miller's mind in 1947 because of his neighbor Jean Wharton (described in *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*) who had made it possible to own his house on Partington Ridge.

Esoteric Buddhism had not been the first great awakening in Henry Miller's spiritual universe. This had come with his reading of Lao Tse at the age of eighteen. Sinnett's work formed a milestone in his life and writing and awakened Miller to the full import of symbolism, which he would explore also through the writings of Freud, Jung and Otto Rank. This complemented the interest he had already developed in the French Symbolist literary movement. Sinnett gave Miller the idea for Spiral Form, the literary conceit in which much of his life's work was written, and which James M. Decker has explored extensively.[18]

On April 30th 1939, Miller wrote to Huntington Cairns about Sinnett's theories:

> This view of the universe is, in my opinion the most sublime, the most logical and illogical at the same time and the most grandiose that I know of. This was true, even though, Lao Tse was my stepping stone on the every-day path of reality.[19]

Sinnett's book was not destined to advocate any particular creed or faith as understood by westerners, but rather the "Wisdom Religion" of the "Buddhas." This idea is equivalent to the

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Secret Doctrine of Theosophy or Rosicrucianism, Richard Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* or the *Gnosis* of the Gnostics. Many of the notions that reappear in Miller's spiritual writings, including *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, have roots here. One of the central concepts is that of Saints or Holy Men (like Christ, the Buddha or St. Francis) who walk the earth and postpone their own eternal state of bliss for the benefit of mankind. Miller likens these figures to holy clowns. The Hindu men of great enlightenment are the Mahatmas. They are known as a brotherhood, with its overtones of Hieronymus Bosch's Brotherhood of the Free Spirit or Henry Miller's "Brotherhood of Fools and Simpletons" from *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*. Their knowledge is acquired independently of books by living and observing life, and through the wisdom of masters. The enlightened ones are fallible, which is to say human. Sinnett writes of the leading brotherhood of his time being located in Tibet. This along with Madame Blavatsky's focus on Tibet and the story of Milarepa in Tibet (with whom Miller identified) explains why this was the destination towards which Miller moved psychologically and spiritually all his life.[20] Tibet is where he believed the great spiritual truths of humanity were preserved.

Sinnett's frame of reference recognized seven distinct principles in the constitution of man, as in Buddhism. Seven is a magical number in both Buddhism and Hinduism. This has spread to other religions—in concepts such as the seven days of creation, seven days of the week, the seven heavens.[21] Miller would often be struck by the cyclical periodicity of the number seven in his life. His marriage-relationships each lasted seven years. If we look at his major creative work we see a seven-year periodicity.[22] Sinnett's *Esoteric Doctrine* was "the missing link between materialism and spirituality" that Miller had always sought. The essence of the doctrine was the path of enlightenment, which allowed one to transcend earthly illusion or Maia, the state of no-mind, leading to dissolution of the ego and Nirvana. The ego is seen as a unity progressing through various

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spheres and states of being in eternity in the endless spiral of Hindu thought:

> The spiritual monad or entity, which has worked its way all around the cycle of evolution, at any one of the many stages of development into which the various existences around us may be grouped, begins its next cycle at the next highest stage… Many times does it circle in this way, right round the system, but its passage round must not be thought of as merely a circular revolution in an orbit. In the cycle of spiritual perfection it is constantly ascending. Thus if we compare the world to a system of towers standing on a plain—towers each of many stories and symbolizing the scale of perfection—the spiritual monad performs a spiral round and round the series, passing through each tower, every time it comes round to it, at a higher level than the one before.[23]

This spiral form is explained by the:

> Spiral pattern accomplished by the life impulses that develop in various kingdoms of nature… the impulse to new higher forms is given… by the rushes of spiritual monads coming round in the cycle in a state fit for the inhabitation of new forms… Thus evolution is accomplished, as regards its essential impulse, by a spiral progress or form through the world… the tide of life, the wave of existence, the spiritual impulse… passes on from planet to planet by rushes, or gushes, not by an even, continuous flow.[24]

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Esoteric Buddhism sees the world as part of a larger system of cause and effect, reality and illusion, a process of constant creation and destruction in an endless spiral. Reincarnation is the lot of man who has not shed illusion and reached enlightenment. The mystical Buddhas on earth of Sinnett's work are parallel to the enlightened priests or *Perfects* of Hieronymus Bosch's Gnostic sect. Sinnett anticipates Oswald Spengler in his vision of the constant cycle of rising and falling civilizations. Sinnett anticipates Élie Faure and his books *The Dance over Fire and Water* and *History of Art* with their cyclical, spiral notion of history, which deeply impacted Miller. Sinnett writes that "the approach of every new obscuration is always signaled by cataclysms of fire and water."[25]

Sinnett sees civilization and hyper-intellectuality as a progression towards evil:

> When your race… has reached its zenith of physical intellectuality and developed its highest civilization… unable to go any higher in its own cycle, its progress towards absolute evil will be arrested… by one of such cataclysmic changes, its great civilization destroyed and all the sub-races of that race will be found going down in their respective cycles or spirals, after a short period of glory and learning… The progress towards absolute evil arrested by the cataclysms of each race in turn, sets in with the acquisition, by means of ordinary intellectual research and scientific advancement, of those powers over nature which accrue even now in adeptship from the premature development of higher faculties than we ordinarily employ… Such powers in the hands of persons willing to use them for merely selfish and unscrupulous ends must not only be

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> productive of social disaster, but also for the persons who hold them, progress in the direction of that evilly spiritual exaltation which is a far more terrible result…[26]

The parallels between Sinnett's ideas and Miller's design in his major auto-novels are evident. In fact, all Miller's reading of Spengler and Faure on spiral form and cyclical nature were merely an affirmation of ideas he had discovered in Sinnett.[27] These were confirmed in Theosophy and in the Hindu works he read in Max Müller's massive collection of *Sacred Books of the East*, while still in his early 20s, in the Brooklyn and New York Public Libraries.[28] Others who influenced Miller deeply echoed similar ideas, which were derived from Hindu notions of history and religion (such as the Transcendentalists) and from the related concept of the myth of the eternal return, which Hinduism bequeathed to many world religions.[29]

Mircea Eliade demonstrates the role of the eternal return in world religions and in society. It is also a key element of those writers who influenced Miller most—from Emerson, Whitman and Nietzsche to Faure and Spengler. It is a system of prototypes and archetypes, which recognizes the duality in the cosmos and the constant spiral of flowing forms, originating in Hinduism. Within this frame of reference man is in rhythm with nature and with the cycles of life on earth and the cycles of life and death, creation and destruction. In essence time no longer exists because everything that happens will happen eternally and every ceremony is a celebration of communion with the Divine Spirit and of repetition of Creation and an echo of the First Cause. The reason that this system and the philosophies attached to it attack the foundation of Christianity is because it is with the Judeo-Christian tradition that time ceased to be seen as circular and has become linear. Without the Eternal Return there is an inevitable end point, which leads to extinction or the denial of life, the denial of eternity. Natural Man lives in cycles

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and lives as part of nature…morality is absent and everything is part of life. It is for this reason that Miller aspired to be a Natural Man. It is also why Natural Man fascinated him and drew him to those figures that assumed unity with Nature symbolically, men like de Sade, Villon, Rabelais, Rimbaud, Thoreau, Whitman, St. Francis, J. C. Powys and Cendrars.

The assault by Nietzsche on Christianity was in reality an assault on Time, on hierarchies and the notion of "election" and of cessation. When Miller wrote in *Tropic of Cancer* that the "hero then, is not Time but Timelessness" he was showing his affinity with Hindu and Buddhist thought and with a great pre-Christian tradition. Miller saw the underlying life force of the cosmos as rhythm or flow of the life impulse. That is why *Tropic of Cancer* ends with a river (like the Ganges and Christ's baptism, a symbol of life eternal). This flow or impulse appeared in different guises in different philosophies. It was Nietzsche's *Will to Power* or Bergson's *Élan vitale*, or the spiritual pulse of Sinnett.

Rhythm is intricately linked to music. Thus, men talk of the Music of the Spheres. Music and dance were traditionally sacred, like the songs of angels. Miller had wanted to be a composer and many of his favorite books were those that showed the influence of music. His own works have musical structures ranging from quartet to symphonic. Miller needed music when writing to write at his best. This is why in Paris he used money Anaïs gave him for food to buy records. Many of his finest books were written in a style that reminded him of music. In *Tropic of Cancer*, the first thing Miller promises is that he will sing. It is an Orphic song he sings. In *Black Spring* he brings dance and ballet to center stage together with passages of atonality that resemble Chinese music or the works of modern composers, like Scriabin or Schoenberg.

Miller remarks:

> I am thinking that when the great silence descends upon all and everywhere music will at

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> last triumph. When into the Womb of Time everything is again withdrawn Chaos will be restored and Chaos is the score upon which Reality is written.

The very opening pages of *Tropic of Cancer* reveal Miller's affinity with the Hindu and Buddhist tradition and his notion of eternal spirals of rebirth and death accompanied by "celestial" music, the song of the world and eternity.[30]

Many of the American writers that Miller admired are highly regarded in India. Indian critics consider the major Transcendentalist writers as holy or enlightened men. Whitman has been described as a Yogi.[31] Parallels have been drawn between Bergson's philosophy and Indian thought.[32] Buddhist and Hindu ideas influenced Nietzsche as they did Goethe and de Sade.[33] Hindu philosophy and religion were deeply influential on ancient Greek philosophy and culture, which along with Goethe and Nietzsche was the main inspiration behind the work of Spengler. Faure submitted to a mixture of influences from the Greek, German and Eastern traditions. Time and Space, since perceptions of them were an essential component of Hindu thought, came to preoccupy all those who came to confront the differences in Hindu-inspired and Judeo-Christian inspired notions of time.[34] For Miller's generation, the greatest recnt philosophical work was arguably Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, in which Time was central.

If Henry Miller was a Hindu or Theosophist by religion, he tried constantly to be Zen in his daily approach to life. Critics have seen Miller's actions within the context of Christian or Western beliefs. But Miller acted in a way that he saw as in conformity with the tenets of Zen Buddhism. This is why American critics in general find it impossible to understand the value, use of sexuality in, or religious nature of, Henry Miller's work. When, in 1938, he read D. T. Suzuki's *Zen and Japanese Culture*, he wrote: "the circle of my philosophical wanderings is

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complete."[35] Miller told Durrell frequently about his interest in both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism.[36] What his friends saw as passivity in Miller's nature he saw as Zen acceptance.[37] These notions are alluded to in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. They received their first concentrated exploration in *Black Spring*, where Buddhist and Hindu symbols, as well as the symbol of the Brooklyn Bridge (which he likens to Lawrence's Rainbow), provided a musical account of his covenant with the divine. *Black Spring* returns to haunt *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* because of Miller's work on *Into the Nightlife*, with Bezalel Schatz, in 1947. In "The Magnetic Poles" Henry Miller discussed the composition of *Black Spring* and revealed how Buddhist and Hindu notions rediscovered while writing the book (1932-35) had allowed him to reconcile his past, present and future. They also released him from the weight of his own family history and the thrall of his own deep fears of insanity, fanaticism and criminality.

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Part 3

Henry Miller would speak in his Epilogue to *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* of the moment in history when he was writing as the most filled with pain, fear, inhumanity and anguish that the world had ever known. The Holocaust and the explosion of atomic bombs were barely three years in the past. The Nazis and their allies had murdered six millions Jews. Tens of millions had died in combat or as a result of secondary effects of wars in the previous 35 years. The Americans, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had killed a quarter of a million civilians with just two bombs.[38] Both Generals MacArthur and Eisenhower said there was no military justification for these bombings. It was more of a warning to the Russians than a way to defeat the Japanese. The Cold War was already underway. The British Empire was crumbling. Humanity was still reeling from multiple traumas. Murder and genocide continued unabated in several theaters. Stalin's Gulags were full. Much of Europe was in ruins, in camps, or on the verge of starvation.

At a time like this, what humanity needed most of all were a spiritual and holy vision, and the ability to laugh and find peace, hope and joy. Reeling from a superabundance of death and horror, what people craved was relief from pain, to be able to lose themselves in the contemplation of a profoundly good side of humanity. They needed to hand their suffering off to a Sin Eater or surrogate—a clown or Christ. Henry Miller's meditations and engagement with these ideas at this time were based, in part, on his impressions of the suffering of the French and his

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friends in Paris, such as Eugène Pachoutinsky, Maurice Girodias and Conrad Moricand, under Nazi occupation. They also tapped into a vein of religious revivalist thought prevalent in France at this time of national shame, settling of accounts and incipient rejuvenation. The recriminations and conflict arising from years of occupation and collaboration and suffering from the after-effects of war were still lashing France. The world was sorely in need of "salvation" or "holiness" and of the peace and harmony a "clown" could offer. French literature of the immediate post-war period was showing a marked division between individual-based Existentialism and religious or Communist tendencies. It was also natural that Miller's mind was engaged with France during the period 1945-48 because he had been writing extensively on France and French literature, and had found his first major commercial and critical success in Paris as a result of American GIs buying his books in droves and of the *Cas Miller*.[39] During the battles to free Miller's books from censorship in France during the mid-late 1940s, many French commentators had recognized him as both an heir to Balzac and as a religious writer. Léger asked Miller to write his circus text because, at this time, Miller was not only the most famous and controversial American writer in Paris, but also a bestseller there, championed by the French intelligentsia.

Henry Miller spoke in his Epilogue to *Smile* of individuals he knew of who had managed to detach themselves and who rose above the grief and suffering that was everywhere apparent in 1947. At times, he claimed he himself was one of these. Henry called these people not "heartless" or "indifferent," but rather "enlightened," in the sense of Zen. His philosophical argument was that they had stepped out of the historical moment (which is always seen in a skewed manner—lacking perspective, influenced by hyperbole, propaganda and vested interests fighting for the hearts and souls of the populace). They had entered a vision of life and world history that is ahistorical (non-linear) or "timeless" and which takes account of Oriental and

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Spenglerian visions of historical cycles and repetition. Miller reveals here the dichotomy between his writing and his everyday persona. While the narrator of his books may seem above the fray, in real life Miller was frantically involved in trying to help people in Europe by sending Red Cross parcels and aid whenever he could. He mailed Moricand and others money, cigarettes, clothes and food. The enlightened ones were, he claimed, people who lived "in the moment, fully, and the radiance which emanates from them is a perpetual song of joy."

Miller meantime identified the circus as:

> A tiny closed off arena of forgetfulness. For a space it enables us to lose ourselves, to dissolve in wonder and bliss, to be transported by the mystery.[40]

When we leave the circus, Miller wrote in his Epilogue:

> We come out of it in a daze, saddened and horrified by the everyday face of the world. But the old everyday world, the world with which we imagine ourselves to be only too familiar, is the only world, and it is a world of magic inexhaustible. Like the clown we go through the motions, forever simulating, forever postponing the grand event. We die struggling to get born. We never were, never are. We are always in the process of becoming…

There are strong parallels between certain of Miller's ideas and influences and those of Samuel Beckett, whom he had known briefly in Paris and who had also been tremendously affected by World War Two. Both writers share a common foundation in popular theater, burlesque, vaudeville and circus. Both

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were also indebted to Marcel Proust in their exploration of self, memory and perception. They were, in *Waiting for Godot* and *Smile*, expressing reactions to the sense of horror that war had engendered in both themselves and society. Miller and Beckett were spiritual men indebted both emotionally and in their writing to the language of the King James Bible and to Buddhism. Beckett's work can and has been interpreted in terms of Zen. *Waiting for Godot* was conceptualized and first drafted around the time Miller was writing *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, though neither writer was aware of the other's piece until later. *Godot* was first performed in 1953. In the play, Pozzo becomes blind. Lucky turns mute. There is an allusion to both the unspeakable and the horror that no man or woman should ever have to witness. Actors whom both Miller and Beckett admired influenced the play: notably Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, two Auguste clowns. Beckett's characters cannot adequately express their confusion and the pain they feel. They cannot bear to look upon the horror of the existential world. They lose themselves in vain hope and illusion, waiting for the advent of another. Miller also explored this sense of existential alienation in those of his characters who live through "the everyday face of the world." The enlightened ones, in contrast, are those who live in the moment and have "died to the world." Those who are unenlightened, he likens to Auguste Angst or Guy le Crêvecoeur (Guy as in the sense of a grotesque figure, Crêvecoeur in the sense of broken-hearted or bitterly disappointed)—Janus clowns with two mouths, and two faces, expressing the schizophrenia and suffering of modern man. Auguste in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* is an Everyman, a clown and holy fool, who through perfection of his art and life finds enlightenment by means of renunciation and surrender and eventually achieves union with the divine light.[41]

Ihab Hassan, in his book, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (Knopf 1967) claimed that the writing of both Beckett and Miller tends toward silence. Beckett's

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work unmistakably moves in the direction of silence, as his later *Fizzles* and short prose works show. Beckett's vision is a pessimistic one. It derives from a Zen obsession with non-being that his Christian upbringing revolts against. It is rooted in his profound religiosity that finds no hope in God or in the man who is made in "His" image. Henry Miller's writing is vastly different. Miller is a religious man. He believes in the universality of God (though not in the Judeo-Christian sense) and in Hindu acceptance. His work does not reveal an end vision of silence, but rather a silence of awe followed by music. Hassan is correct that: "His vision is of a state of cosmic innocence wherein language ceases to intrude on our love." The end of writing and books is, as in Beckett's *oeuvre*, the final aim of Miller's work. Yet, Miller, in contrast to Beckett, implies a movement from this end of language to a song of praise, an expression of joy anchored in, and at one with, divine music, which he first refers to in *Tropic of Cancer* and *Black Spring*. If one is unified with the divine, then one is by definition in *harmony* with oneself and the Godhead. Harmony is musical. One enters the "Song of the World" and one's own life becomes one's song. One's actions become one's prayers. The silence anticipated by Miller might be the death of language, but it is not the end of expression. It is a state of wonder. In Miller's mind, the "Word" (Logos) and music are the same—his notion of divine language *is* music. Music and language are ultimately potential elements of pure being. They are perfect expressions of the divine. Miller's vision is a Hindu one and thus never pessimistic—its keynote is acceptance.[42] Beckett's vision is essentially Buddhist in its preoccupation with illusion, though he does not have faith that the everyday man (who is his obsession) will break free into enlightenment. Miller is, in contrast, a utopian Transcendentalist, whose vision of the potential of a glorious future or paradise here on earth is most obviously revealed in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* and *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*.

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Henry Miller reflected on the clown Auguste in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*:

> He exists, if only for the reason that I imagined him to be. He came from the blue and he returns to the blue. He has not perished. He is not lost. Neither will he be forgotten. Only the other day I was talking to a painter I know about the figures left us by Seurat. I said that they were rooted there where he gave them being—eternally. How grateful I am to have lived with the figures of Seurat—on the Grande Jatte, at the Medrano, and elsewhere in the mind.[43]

Miller said that there was nothing illusory about the circus paintings of Seurat:

> They dwell in sunlight, in a harmony of form and rhythm which is sheer melody. And so with the clowns of Rouault, the angels of Chagall, the ladder and the moon of Miró… So with Max Jacob, who never ceased to be a clown, even after he had found God.[44]

The key to Miller's description of art lies in his association of perfection and divinity with music. Each of the painters who inspired Miller during the writing of *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* "testified to the eternal reality of their vision." It was a vision born of the perfect unity of language, symbol, form, color and music. This state was one of pure creation. It was thus divine, even though expressed via the conduit of a human hand. It comprised a vision uniting the everyday and the mundane with the holy and sublime (as in mediaeval cathedrals or Hindu temples). Art, like architecture, can be seen as "frozen music." Great art was the expression of divine knowledge through the

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medium of the religious figure of the artist/creator, just as great writing was the word of God expressed through the conduit of the poet/writer. When Man reaches true enlightenment and perfection, a state of truly divine being, art and the vocation of artist would cease to have meaning. The vocation of artist or writer is inherently linked to a yearning for the divine.

In 1931, Henry Miller had written an article on the Cirque Medrano, in Paris, in which he mentioned Seurat's paintings. It appeared first in the *New York Herald Tribune*.[45] The text was written with a specific expatriate audience in mind. He claimed that back in America only children loved the circus, whereas in France it was "a glorious institution" dear to everyone. Miller saw the Medrano as having a "feeling of permanency" and as "one of the symbols of European culture that speaks to us most poignantly of that fundamental difference between our two continents: tempo." The arena is so small and intimate that the spectator feels as if he is actually participating in the performance "united with the rhythm, color, the drama." One has the impression of being at the "genesis of movement," and "through it we are brought a little closer to the miracle of life." Words Miller uses to describe the performance include "magical" and "mystery." There are biblical overtones. The whole effect of the French circus has "an Oriental feeling." Miller would compare the Medrano to American vaudeville—yet the pace of the latter was far too rapid (like American life in general) to allow for reflection. Miller spoke of Chaplin and how it was in his "vulgarity" that he "revealed to us the unexpected piety of his art." Miller likened the burlesque (as opposed to the vaudeville) stage in America to the *cirque intime* of the Medrano, which he so admired. He drew a parallel between these shows and the spatially limited but universal perspective of Chaplin's great film *The Circus* (1928), with its identification with the Auguste genre of clowns. At the Medrano, everything seemed to follow an inevitable natural tempo: "slow, rhythmic modulations of light caressing

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a form or of a seed germinating in the soil." Miller's description echoes the form of music and ballet.

He claims that even the performance of the trained seals demands:

> The same sort of wonder and admiration that would be elicited from us if an orchestra of Australian Bushmen should extract from their rude instruments the music of Beethoven or Wagner.

Henry Miller brought to bear on this early text many of the themes that would influence *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. These include reflections on space/time, dance movement as poetry to music, the Orient (China, Japan and India), the religious nature of clowning, the link between vulgarity and divinity and between high art (as in Seurat) and everyday life (as in the circus). Even the seals appear in both texts.

Henry Miller was immersed in French art, and art created in Paris, from his youth. He discovered this first in the library of the father of his childhood friends, Joey and Tony Imhoff, who was a painter, at Glendale. Henry's father, Heinrich Miller, also had a strong interest in art, as did many of Miller's friends, such as (painter/illustrator and teacher) Emil Schnellock. One theme that remained strong and vibrant in the literary and artistic traditions of those countries, which spoke languages belonging to the Romance family, was a catholic vision of life that incorporated scenes of everyday street life and ordinary people into works of literature or painting. This tradition existed strongly in pre-Puritan literature in English, in Chaucer or Shakespeare or the Eighteenth century novel, but was widely repressed after the spread of Puritanism. In France this tradition remained vividly alive despite the attempts of moralists to ban writers such as Flaubert, Baudelaire and Zola (who was depicted as clown and Christ during the attacks upon him after the Dreyfuss

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Affair). Much French, Russian (Orthodox Catholic) and Spanish literature and art, to which Miller was irresistibly drawn, was rooted in scenes of everyday life. In American novels concerned with society, there was often a strong political and protestant element that implied judgment and moral outrage. The catholic tradition differed from this because its vision was more spiritual and personal, concerned with individual salvation rather than how the individual fit into an ideal political vision of what it meant to be American, or to enter the Melting Pot.

Whether it was in the novels, prose and poetry of Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Baudelaire, Zola or Céline or in the art of Hiroshige, Utrillo, Picasso, Chagall or Toulouse Lautrec, Van Gogh and Manet, one repeatedly confronted visions of ordinary people living their lives. Just as literature showed an increasing concern with problems of society, such as alcoholism and prostitution, and in public entertainment in the late 19th century, so did art. Picasso would for a time focus on bullfights and minotaurs, after a fascination with clowns, circus and acrobats. Chagall, Seurat and Rouault became obsessed with the circus, Degas with the ballet. Marc Chagall produced a series of works based on his visits to the circus in 1927, simply entitled "Cirque." Chagall visited the circus weekly with his daughter Ida for many years. He would, like Miller, Modigliani, Jacob, Rouault, Picasso, Laforgue and others, identify himself with clowns, acrobats and tightrope walkers.[46] Miller was familiar with Baudelaire's image of the writer as a clown.[47] Clowning and violent comedy were an essential element of several of the anti-establishment artistic movements of Miller's day, such as Dada, Futurism and Surrealism. Clowning had undergone a radical change in the late 19th Century, in France. As the general populace grew more educated, organized and rebellious (The Paris Commune, for example) certain clowns abandoned the passivity and victim role of Pierrot and became violent, lewd, and assertive in their antics. Clowns became closely associated with political and social rebellion. They could also become

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androgynous or Janus-faced, or represent the schizophrenia of modern life and personalities, which so obsessed Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin.

Alfred Jarry (an important influence on Miller and Antonin Artaud) had dressed as a clown and used clown images in his writing. Guillaume Apollinaire and Max Jacob had inherited the mantle of clown from Jarry. In Mayakovski's Futurist film *I Want to be a Futurist*, a prominent role was given to Russian clown Vitally Lazarenko. Tristan Tzara, the leading Dadaist, was known as a clown. The revolt of these "clowns" against society was founded in behaviors that resembled the "innocent violence" and clowning of childhood or traditional societies. In 1955, one of the most powerful and politically explosive symbols of clowning in French literature appeared, Jean Genet's *The Blacks: A Clown Show*.

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Part 4

The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder begins with the paradox at the heart of the clown's image, later reprised in Smokey Robinson's song "Tears of a Clown": "Nothing could diminish the luster of that extraordinary smile which was engraved on Auguste's sad countenance." Henry Miller immediately juxtaposes the contrasting sides (the Janus face of ancient Greek theatre) of the clown so movingly explored by Rouault (who painted portraits of himself as a clown)—the tragic pain behind the smile of a clown. It is a smile, which "expresses the ineffable."[48] Auguste sits at the foot of a ladder that reaches to the moon. He is deep in contemplation, "his thoughts far away."[49] Auguste's comportment is "a simulation of ecstasy, which he had brought to perfection." It was his inimitable trademark, which the audience loved. Before Auguste, "never had a buffoon thought to depict the miracle of ascension."[50] The end of his act would be brought about by the moment when he was nuzzled by a white mare with a mane that "fell to the ground in rivulets of gold." The radius of the spotlight, "in which he was born anew each evening," circumscribes Auguste's world. It was "a circle of enchantment." Sitting next to the ladder, which Miller describes as "eternal," Auguste and his companions "managed to reproduce each night the drama of *initiation* and *martyrdom*."[51]

The crowds that look down upon Auguste are "bathed in concentric circles of shadow."[52] The musicians are "swaying like reeds in the flickering play of light and shadow." Auguste is accompanied in all his movements by music. Yet "when the moment

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came to enter the trance, the musicians, suddenly inspired, would pursue Auguste from *one spiral of bliss to the next…*"[53]

Henry Miller recounts how Auguste, as he applied his face paint, would reflect on how, with every performance, the other objects in the ring retained their nature. The horse was a horse, the seals were seals, and the table was a table. This echoes Schoenberg's comments cited above. Yet, Auguste was obliged to effect a transformation. "While remaining a man," he "had to become something else. He had to assume the powers of a very special being with a very special gift." Auguste knows that it is easy to make people laugh or cry, even without make up or without doing anything. A few words could suffice to change someone's whole frame of mind. What he aspired to was something beyond the ordinary; "he wanted to endow his spectators with a joy, which would prove imperishable."[54] It was an obsession with this idea that had "inspired him to sit at the foot of the ladder and feign ecstasy." He had, on the very first night he had performed this routine, initially done it by accident, because he forgot what came next and lost himself, like Rousseau's solitary walker, in reverie. He went into a trance, during which he gave the impression of perfect peace and harmony.[55] He was awoken from his dream state by the rapturous applause of the spectators. The next night he consciously tried to repeat the stunt. What he ultimately sought was to replace the "senseless, raucous laughter" of the audience, which usually accompanied his antics, with "the joy supreme, which he longed to communicate." Yet each night "despite his most devout efforts, the same delirious applause awaited him."

Auguste's performance became more and more successful. The approval of the crowd only caused him to become more wistful. He knew that his message was not understood. The laughter of the crowd became "more jarring to his ears." One night, when he failed to awaken from his trance, to "come back," the audience was enraged by his betrayal of what they expected from him. There were jeers and catcalls, objects thrown down

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upon him from the stalls. For thirty minutes, they had awaited his "return." Sensing that he might never emerge from his state of bliss, there was "an explosive outburst of derision." Auguste was knocked unconscious by objects thrown by the enraged spectators. He awoke in his dressing room, attended by a doctor. His body was covered in wounds. His head and face were "a mass of cuts and bruises. The blood had coagulated over the paint, distorting his image beyond recognition." He looked like a slaughtered animal left on a butcher's block.[56]

Auguste felt his position at the circus was untenable. He soon fled the world he knew. Auguste no longer wished to be a clown. "He drifted unknown, unrecognized, among the millions he had taught to laugh." He felt no resentment or bitterness, just "deep sadness." Regularly, he almost burst into tears. His suffering and sense of isolation was immense. After many months, he realized that he was so distraught because something "had been taken from him… something which was uniquely his own." "Then one day it dawned upon him that it was long, long ago since he had known the state of bliss." His first instinct was to run to his hotel room, but instead he took a taxi to the outskirts of town, where Auguste asked the driver to leave him alone and in peace underneath a lone tree.[57] Sitting under the tree, Auguste tried to recapture the trigger for the state of bliss he had known in the circus ring. Yet the sun blinded him. He decided he must wait for the night to fall: "when the moon comes out everything will fall into place."

While waiting for night to fall, August fell into a deep sleep. He dreamed he was back in the ring. "Everything was as it had always been except that it was no longer a circus in which things were going on." He was in nature and the moon above him was the real moon. There were walls of people on all sides rising up to the sky. They sat in total silence. "They hung there, these vast multitudes of specters, suspended in fathomless space, each and every one of them crucified." Auguste was paralyzed with fear. His torment was so great that he felt "more cruelly

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deserted and abandoned than the Savior himself had ever been…" All exits were, he felt, blocked. "In desperation he took to the ladder, started climbing feverishly, and climbed and climbed until his breath gave out." The ladder stretched all the way up through the clouds to the moon. He was so high up that he could barely see the ground. Feeling himself to be totally abandoned and without hope, like Christ upon the Cross, Auguste began to weep and sob. Slowly but surely, the sound of the wailing and sobs of the multitude surrounding him echoed his own pain. He felt he was also assuming their burden of suffering. It was "horrible." He felt like a "prisoner in Purgatory." The clamoring noise of the wailing of all humanity and the weight of his own pain made him swoon. Auguste fell. As he approached the earth, he knew that this would almost certainly be the end of him, "the death of deaths." In that last split second his whole life rose up before him. It was his final chance to search for meaning in his past:

> But the most important moment in his life, the jewel about which all the meaningful events clustered, he could not revive. It was revelation itself that was foundering with him. For he knew that at some moment in time all had been made clear to him. And now he was about to die, this, the supreme gift, was being snatched from him. Like a miser, with cunning and ingenuity beyond all reckoning, Auguste succeeded in doing the impossible—seizing the last fraction of a second, which had been allotted to him, he began dividing it into infinitesimal moments of duration. Nothing he had experienced during the forty years of his life, not all the moments of joy put together, could begin to compare with the sensual delight he now experienced in husbanding these splintered fragments of an exploded fraction of

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> a second. But when he had chopped this last moment of duration, he made an alarming discovery that he had lost the ability to remember. He had blanked himself out.[58]

The day after this dream, Auguste was exhausted. He stayed in his room. He was harried by memories that descended upon him and tormented him, "like a plague of locusts." Towards evening, he decided to go for a walk among the anonymous crowds. He had trouble recalling which town he was in. Strolling towards the edge of town, he came upon the traveling circus. The wagons were arranged in a circle. Approaching one of them, he began to climb the steps to knock at the door. At that moment, he felt "the muzzle of the horse was grazing his back."[59] This act brought Auguste "a deep joy." He caressed the horse like a long-lost and dearly loved friend. A woman opened the door, but at first did not recognize him (an echo of Christ not being recognized by Mary Magdalene in The Gospel of St. John, Chapter 20). When she realized who it was, she embraced him and kissed him. Auguste's first concern was to get sugar for the horse. While the woman looked for sugar in her wagon, the moon suddenly appeared from behind the trees. At this moment, "a wonderful calm fell upon Auguste." There was "a delicious sensation which spread throughout his body whenever the warm wet muzzle of the horse licked the palm of his hand. He was reliving that intermediate stage which he used to experience nightly at the foot of the ladder, the period between the falling away of bliss and the wild burst of applause…" So captivated was Auguste by his experience that he never returned to his hotel; he just went to sleep in the circle of wagons. He decided to travel again with the troupe. His identity would remain secret, in an attempt to become anonymous. The Carney folk would help him keep it so.

Auguste began a new life with the circus, doing menial tasks. He found a new sense of freedom in watching the new clown—

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in being a spectator. He felt that it was good to become anonymous, to throw oneself into the midst of life rather than be center stage. He felt he had "become as dust."[60] Auguste realized that he had been egotistical and arrogant to want to change the hearts of men. He was no longer living as a famous clown. He no longer made people laugh or received great acclaim. Yet he noticed that he was receiving something he never had before—smiles. Since he no longer hid behind a mask or assumed a role, he received:

> Smiles of recognition. He was accepted again as a human being, accepted for himself, for whatever it was that distinguished him from, and at the same time united him with, his fellow man.

Auguste found that in his new state he was perfectly happy and at peace. He was kind and gentle with the animals. He even said "a vôtre service" as he gave the mare her feed. Auguste felt a sense of unity with all creation. His life became an act of praise. He would even share his earnings with those in need. He kept just a little money for tobacco.

One day the usual routine was broken, when the new clown, Antoine, fell ill.[61] Auguste knew that only he could replace Antoine. The ringmaster was concerned, given that Auguste's last performance had been a failure. Finally, he agreed because he knew that, although this one show had not gone well, Auguste was one of the truly great clowns. Auguste even begged, with tears in his eyes, to be given a chance to save the day. Auguste sat in front of the mirror while putting on his make-up. He slowly erased his image and personality, replacing it with that of another: "The real Auguste no one knew because with his fame he had become a solitary."[62] During his preparations, Auguste wondered if this secret and solitary life had been meaningless. "He had only begun to live from the day he had taken up with the troupe, from the moment he had begun to serve in

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the capacity of the humblest." He had found peace in being nobody and living a simple life free from fame and expectation. When he appeared in the ring that night, he justified, it would not be as himself but rather as the obscure clown Antoine, who was a journeyman with no reputation. When Antoine performed, the crowd took no more notice of him than the seals.

Shortly before the performance, Auguste had a thought that "shattered his reverie." If anyone recognized him then he would be propelled back into the limelight—there would be fame and reporters, media and endless questions. "Never again would he have any peace." Auguste went to see Antoine in his sickbed. Antoine remarked that no one would be able to tell them apart in make-up. For Antoine, looking at Auguste was like looking in a mirror. They were both nobodies (anonymous) and yet "everybody at the same time." Auguste told Antoine that he thought the most difficult thing of all was to be oneself. It was difficult precisely because it is effortless and involves a state of "no-mind," of just *being*. If one achieved this, then laughter and applause were replaced by smiles. Auguste told Antoine that one could be enriched beyond measure by being at the service of others, but only as long as they are not aware they are enriching you when they allow you to serve them. Auguste told Antoine that he was receiving a great gift by being allowed to substitute that night. The gift was that "I can be myself by being you." Auguste would be free of the burden he would assume if he performed as himself. Whatever he did that night would be attributed to Antoine. Antoine had always wanted to be a famous clown, but lacked the genius. Thus they would both gain.

Walking to the big top, Auguste had an idea. He had decided that he would (in the guise of Antoine) give the greatest performance of his career. He would make Antoine a gift of the reputation he had always desired. Antoine would emerge as a "world figure." Auguste subsequently gave the performance he wished for—the audience became delirious. After the show, the ringmaster was horrified. He believed this would ruin Antoine.

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Auguste tried to reassure him that in fact it would "make Antoine." Returning for a solo act, Auguste enhanced the show even more. He was Auguste the Master, Antoine as Auguste and Auguste as Antoine all at the same time. Antoine occupied all his thoughts. Auguste was "dead" to him. "His whole concern was to make Antoine so famous there would nevermore be any mention of Auguste." He wished to erase himself from history in order to retreat into anonymity.

The following day, everyone was talking about "Antoine's" genius. The news of the spectacular performance had been kept from Antoine until Auguste could explain things to him and prepare him for the role he would have to assume. He thought out long explanations and was sure he could convince Antoine that it was a great idea. Auguste finally set out to see Antoine. "Not once did it occur to him that what he was about to propose was beyond Antoine's power of acceptance." After all, Auguste had made Antoine famous, just as he had always wanted to be. Auguste's own rise to fame had been caused by the accidental discovery of a routine. He reflected how the clown in the circus ring repeated over and over again the same mistakes and foolishness that people carried out in their daily lives:

> It was his special privilege to reenact the errors, the follies, the stupidities, all the misunderstandings, which plague human kind… Not to understand when all is clear as daylight; not to catch on even though the trick is repeated a thousand times for you; to grope about like a blind man, when all signs point in the right direction; to insist on opening the right door although it is marked Danger! to walk head on into a mirror instead of going around it; to look through the wrong end of a rifle, a loaded rifle! People never tired of these absurdities because for millennia humans have traversed all the

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> wrong roads, because for millennia all their seeking and questioning have landed them in a cul-de-sac. The master of ineptitude has all time in his domain. He only surrenders in eternity.[63]

Walking along, Auguste witnessed the ringmaster emerging from Antoine's wagon. Auguste was shocked to hear that Antoine had died. In conversation, the ringmaster told Auguste that someone had told Antoine about the enormous success of the previous night's show. The ringmaster believed that Antoine had almost immediately "died of a broken heart." Both of them knew that now it would be hard to explain away the previous night's performance. Auguste was struck with a profound sadness. He decided to wander to town to gather his thoughts. Sitting at a café, he decided that he had no choice but to either become Antoine or Auguste yet again. The circus could not survive without a clown.[64] Suddenly, he began planning that night's show. He had, "without realizing it… stepped into Antoine's shoes." He awoke from his plans with a jolt of insight. "Haven't you had enough yet, eh? You killed off Auguste! You murdered Antoine… Only two days ago you were happy—a free man. Now you're trapped, and a murderer to boot." Then Auguste asked himself a vital question. Had he really cared whether Antoine became great or not, or did he simply want to reassure himself that "the reputation he had created really belonged to him?" He decided, upon reflection, "my happiness was real but unfounded. I have to recapture it, but honestly this time. I have to hold onto it with two hands as though it were a precious jewel. I must learn to be happy as Auguste, as the clown (fool) I am." Auguste returned to the circus and told the ringmaster that he was leaving to travel far away. He did not care that a glorious future awaited him. He wanted to start from zero "because a clown is usually only happy when he is somebody else—I don't want to be anybody else but myself." The ringmaster tried to dissuade him, but Auguste was adamant—"I've

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just discovered… *Reality*! That's the very word for it. Now I know who I am and what I am and what I must do. *That's reality*. What you call 'reality' is sawdust."

Auguste left the circus immediately and definitively, with just a few *sous* in his pocket. Soon night would fall. He had neither shelter nor much money for food. All he could do was lie down to sleep in the open, like the "beasts in the field." He dreamed of going to South America. Auguste sat on a park bench after wandering the streets for what seemed like an eternity. He began to reflect on laughter and tears and on how these separated men from animals. He thought to himself: "I'm not an albatross!" Miller's language links his clown to Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in which the Albatross is a symbol of Christ. Auguste thus rejects his role as a surrogate Christ. Auguste believed that his key discovery was that he should simply be what he was "without diminishing or augmenting himself… The mistake he had made was to go beyond his proper bounds. He had not been content to make people laugh; he had tried to make them joyous. Joy is God-given. Had he not discovered this in abandoning himself—by doing whatever came to hand…."[65]

Auguste realized that "his real tragedy…lay in the fact that he was unable to communicate his knowledge of the existence of another world, a world beyond ignorance and frailty, beyond laughter and tears. It was this barrier that kept him a clown, God's very own clown, for there was truly no one to whom he could make clear his dilemma." He knew that if he were truly the clown he should be one at every moment of the day—that the duality in him, between clown and man, between desire and actuality, must be abolished. He did not even feel the need of props—"he would be so absolutely himself that only the truth, which now burned in him like a fire, would be recognizable."

Auguste closed his eyes and breathed peacefully for a long time. When he opened his eyes "he beheld a world from which the veil had been removed. It was the world which had always existed in his heart, ever ready to manifest itself, but which only

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begins to beat the moment one beats in unison with it." Without even realizing it, he began to shed tears of joy. He struggled to adjust from "sight to vision. From the heart of his being there issued an incessant murmur of thanks." Auguste was suffused with wellbeing and strength, ecstatic, filled with "immense joy." There was a man in uniform approaching him. Auguste imagined him as a deliverer. As Auguste reached to embrace the man he was brutally clubbed and felled with one blow. Auguste died without even making a sound. Two passers-by ran and turned over his body (thus forming a symbolic trinity, as in Rouault's painting, The Wounded Clown). He was smiling. Auguste lay with "a broad seraphic smile from which the blood bubbled and trickled. His eyes were open and gazing at the moon that had just appeared in the night sky."

The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder begins with Auguste depicting the miracle of ascension from one spiral of bliss to the next. His whole ability to do this had begun in a moment of forgetfulness, when he no longer knew what was supposed to happen next and had entered a trance, almost like the mild epilepsy from which Miller suffered. Auguste begins the story as a clown, who has to adopt a persona and mask every evening in order to perform and be loved. His real face is unknown to the world. He dies each day in front of a mirror. Auguste is an anonymous man, whose only name is that of a style of clown. Having received a vision of joy and bliss, Auguste wishes to share this truth with the world. He aspires to be a teacher. In order to pass on his message, he gives the impression of perfect peace and ecstasy—he wishes to reveal the potential for peace and bliss in all of us. The ideal audience response to this performance would be silence, as at a Wagner opera. Silence would symbolize an accord with the mystery that Auguste seeks to unfold. Yet, misunderstanding, the spectators clap insanely.

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Auguste feels the burden and isolation of a misunderstood prophet. One day, made ever more remote from the audience by their inability to follow him, Auguste does not return from his trance. The audience reacts in outrage at the sight of this humble clown who has abandoned himself to bliss and left them to face the horror of their own lives alone. In the savage attacks upon Auguste's body that follow, we witness an allegorical representation of the road to Calvary and the Crucifixion. The audience cannot follow his example. Instead, they demand that he fulfill the role they have assigned him and carry their burdens for them, like a modern-day Christ.

The night that he was attacked, Auguste died to the world he had known. He disappeared into anonymity by the very act of revealing his true face. He had been maligned and derided for doing what came most naturally to him. Most people put on a mask to live in society. Auguste assimilates back into society by taking off his painted smile. He then suffered enormously because he felt that he was being obliged to deny his true nature—that of a visionary poet and clown, with a religious message. His sadness was compounded because he knew that by being forced to flee the circus he had lost his ability to feel bliss because he was no longer at one with his true nature and his vocation.

Like Jacob in the Bible, when he wrestled all night with an angel, Auguste later wrestles all night under a tree with his fears and his demons in his dreams. He undergoes a form of spiritual death in which his ego is obliterated and he finds himself clinging so tightly to his memory of bliss that he gains the ability to suspend time and death.

Auguste found his way back to the circus. He began to live a humble life in which he found true happiness in humility and self-sacrifice, in anonymity of a different kind. He was again in his element. He received smiles that came from warmth and genuine love for his person, instead of laughter born of the antics of his adoptive personality, his mask. When the new clown Antoine fell ill, Auguste was tempted to sin, to cling to the

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memory of his past glory and to an assertion of his ego. He justified his adopting the persona of Antoine and giving a magnificent performance as being a supreme gift for Antoine—yet it was born of vanity and illusion. Auguste was giving Antoine something that he could never accept, because the very act that Antoine would have to imitate was not his own and not one he had the capacity to uphold. Antoine, instead of being happy, was broken-hearted unto death by the burden that Auguste placed upon him. Auguste had killed Antoine by demanding that he spend the rest of his days in imitation of Auguste playing Antoine. What made Antoine unique—and himself—was obliterated. Knowing that he could never be the master clown that Auguste was, and knowing he could not live life in the shadow of another man's genius or vision, was the root of Antoine' demise. He felt it impossible to spend his life living a lie or another man's truth. Auguste had tried, he claimed, to obliterate the clown Auguste from the memory of man by making Antoine great in his place. Auguste's actions were, whatever their motivation, selfish and rooted in illusion. He had hoped to force another clown (superficially looking like himself) into the public gaze. Yet Antoine could not bear the weight of the burden he would have to carry. Auguste subconsciously wanted Antoine to assume a burden that Auguste had already rejected and fled from. Antoine, first by his passivity and anonymity and then by his refusal to be other than he truly was, preferring to die rather than that, provoked Auguste to a new level of consciousness about his own condition.

With the death of Antoine, Auguste realized that his previous happiness was unfounded because he had not been able to reconcile himself to his true nature and to act in accord with it at every moment of his life. Antoine, by preferring to die rather than not be himself, had paradoxically taught Auguste the final truth he needed to see in order to become enlightened—that one must be truly oneself at all times (not just in the public gaze) and assume one's own life and destiny. In order to be

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happy one has to live in the moment, free of ego and desire, just simply live and be happy being oneself and true to one's deepest nature. From now on, Auguste would neither try to assume other men's burdens or convert them to anything. He would neither try to augment himself or diminish himself. Instead he would enter the flow of life and be at one with the world. The duality in Auguste, between clown and everyday man, between desire and actuality, was finally abolished. The truth that he had discovered would be evident for those with eyes to see. For those who were not open to his discovery, it would remain meaningless. Like all religious revelation, in the very act of living, his life would become both his prayer and his song. He would bear witness by example. Auguste is subsequently killed senselessly by a figure that represents earthly power and authority. Yet, by the smile that he holds in death, Auguste asserts his immortality, peace and his deliverance from a world of illusion. There is no sadness in his death, no regret. Violence may kill a man or a clown, but it cannot kill the truth and divinity that lies within.

Henry Miller's *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* attempts to integrate Christian, Islamic and Buddhist/Hindu allegories and traditions to present a universal vision of man's salvation. The most understated, but obvious, influence on the tale was the story of *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, which Miller read, along with many other books by Hesse during the mid 1940s. Miller told Cendrars that he saw *Siddhartha* as the history of the very first Zen Buddhist. Hesse's story revealed an unequivocal acceptance of life that Miller adored.

Henry Miller integrates first Christian and then Indian images as the story of Auguste progresses—the woman who fails to recognize Auguste draws the parallel to Mary Magdalene, who fails to recognize Christ after his resurrection in the Gospel of

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St. John. Auguste himself undergoes crucifixion and resurrection, but he also, like Gautama/Siddhartha, receives enlightenment under a tree. In the early part of Hesse's *Siddhartha*, the hero, like Auguste at the start of his story, was "loved by everyone." "He was a source of joy for everybody, he was a delight for them all." Yet he was dissatisfied because he felt that he did not have the answers he needed for enlightenment, to discover the Atman within:

> Siddhartha was not a source of joy for himself. He found no delight in himself. Walking the rosy paths of the fig tree garden, sitting in the bluish shade of the grove of contemplation, washing his limbs daily in the bath of repentance, sacrificing in the dim shade of the mango forest, his gestures of perfect decency, everyone's love and joy, he still lacked all joy in his heart.

Siddhartha begins his quest for true enlightenment by standing under the moon, awaiting the blessing of his father, who is unable to understand his dissatisfaction. Through a series of trials, failures and missteps, Siddhartha finally reaches enlightenment and realizes that "your soul is the whole world." His vision becomes one not of Heaven, as a Christian might aspire to, but rather acceptance, of paradise here and now on earth, such as Miller advocated in his mature work. The key was to not defer paradise or enlightenment to some future life or imaginary Heaven, but to accept that it is within one's grasp right here and now:

> When someone is searching, said Siddhartha, then it might easily happen that the only thing his eyes still see is that what he searches for, that he is unable to find anything, to let anything enter his mind, because he always thinks of

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> nothing but the object of his search, because he has a goal, because he is obsessed by the goal. Searching means: having a goal. But finding means: being free, being open, and having no goal… . Striving for your goal, there are many things you don't see, which are directly in front of your eyes.

Siddhartha, like Auguste, comes to realize that:

> Knowledge can be conveyed, but not wisdom. It can be found, it can be lived; it is possible to be carried by it, miracles can be performed with it, but it cannot be expressed in words or taught.

Siddhartha's vision and Auguste's vision are ultimately one. Auguste does not, as a Christian might, get caught up with guilt at the death of Antoine. He realizes that Antoine could have acted differently had he so chosen. Auguste refuses any longer to play the Christ-like role of assuming the burdens of other people's actions. Siddhartha states:

> The opposite of every truth is just as true! It's like this: any truth can only be expressed and put into words when it is one-sided. Everything is one-sided which can be thought with thoughts and said with words—it's all one-sided, all just one half, all lacks completeness, roundness, and oneness. When the exalted Gautama spoke, in his teachings, of the world, he had to divide it into Sansara and Nirvana, into deception and truth, into suffering and salvation. It cannot be done differently; there is no other way for he who wishes to teach. But the world itself,

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what exists around us and inside of us, is never one-sided. A person or an act is never entirely Sansara or entirely Nirvana; a person is never entirely holy or entirely sinful. It does really seem like this, because we are subject to deception, as if Time was something real. Time is not real, Govinda! I have experienced this over and over again. And if Time is not real, then the gap which seems to exist between the world and eternity, between suffering and blissfulness, between evil and good, is also a deception. How come? Govinda asked timidly. Listen well, my dear friend, listen well! The sinner, which I am and which you are, is a sinner, but in times to come he will be Brahman again, he will reach the Nirvana, he will be Buddha—and now see: these 'times to come' are a deception. They are only a parable! The sinner is not on his way to becoming a Buddha. He is not in the process of developing, though our capacity for thinking does not know how else to picture or see things. No, within the sinner is, now and today, already the future Buddha. His future is already all there. You have to worship in him, within you, in everyone, the Buddha that is eternally coming into being, the possible, the hidden Buddha.

The world, my friend Govinda, is not imperfect, or on a slow path towards perfection: No! It is perfect in every moment; all sin already carries the divine forgiveness in itself, all small children already have the old person in themselves; all infants already have death within, all dying people eternal life. It is not possible for any person to see how far another person has already

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> progressed on his path; in the robber and dice-gambler, the Buddha is waiting; in the Brahman, the robber is waiting. In deep meditation, there is the possibility to put Time out of existence, to see all life which was, is and will be, as if it was simultaneous. Everything is good, everything is perfect, and everything is Brahman. Therefore, I see whatever exists as good. Death is to me like life, sin like holiness, wisdom like foolishness, everything has to be as it is, everything only requires my consent, only my willingness, my loving agreement, to be good for me, to do nothing but work for my benefit, to be unable to ever harm me. I have borne witness in my body and in my soul that I needed sin very much. I needed lust, the desire for possessions, vanity, and needed the most shameful despair, in order to learn how to give up all resistance—in order to learn how to love the world, in order to stop comparing it to some world I wished, or I imagined, some kind of perfection I had invented, but rather to leave it as it is and to love it and to enjoy being a part of it.

In this statement by Siddhartha, we have a truth that lies at the heart of Buddhist and Hindu teaching. It also lies at the very foundations of the French catholic literary tradition of Rabelais, Georges Bataille, Baudelaire, Max Jacob and Arthur Rimbaud in which Henry Miller wrote, and which spoke so often of clowns and angels. In *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, we have not only an allegorical revelation of the Buddhist/Hindu way of life, but also a clear refutation of the essential doctrines of modern Christianity. In this little known work, Henry Miller is signaling his movement towards enlightenment, away from the Christ figure with whom he had identified until his middle years,

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towards the "Buddha" that he now saw himself able to become. Auguste reenacts a parable of Miller's own life journey—from a clown and Christ figure bent on saving people from suffering (youth and Western Union), through periods of anonymity and suffering, crime and illusion (1920s/June), rebellion (1930s), and isolation (early 1940s), onwards to the point of enlightenment (liberation of France/ Big Sur/birth of his children Valentine and Tony). Enlightenment came when Miller realized that the only potential savior was within each of us. Rereading the Gospels during the mid-1940s, he became fixated with the days Christ spent on earth between the resurrection and ascension. At that time there were those who asked Christ if he would create the Kingdom of Israel on earth at that very moment. Yet another sacrifice was being demanded of Jesus at a time when he had already given his life and his example! Christ chose not to, but rather ascended to Heaven. By his own death he had given all that he had to give at this point. If men would truly be saved then they must find their own way to his truth, of their own volition and by means of personal revelation. He had taught enough and said enough and was done. He could no longer deny the Godhead that was within him. It was time for men to take responsibility for themselves.

In *Siddhartha*, when the protagonist meets a Buddha he finds him fallible and not always convincing—rather than an infallible deity. Buddha is simply a man.

Siddhartha says to him:

> And so I think, O Illustrious One, that nobody finds salvation through teachings. To nobody, O Illustrious One, can you communicate in words and teaching what happened to you in the hour of your enlightenment. That is why I am going my way—not to seek a better doctrine, for I know there is none, but to leave all

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doctrines and all teachers and to reach my goal alone, or die.

The paradox of this attitude, which is also Auguste and Miller's final attitude, is that it is Hindu and yet refutes all doctrinal absolutes. The explanation is that true Hinduism is an all-encompassing religion that accommodates all faiths and denies none. Henry Miller's path to enlightenment was, like Nietzsche's, to deny the time-bound linear vision of Judeo-Christianity. Miller became a Hindu, whose daily mode of living was Zen.

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Part 5

Henry Miller first wrote to Professor Wallace Fowlie, on November 13th 1943 from Beverly Glen, after reading his essay, "Narcissus." Miller instinctively knew that Fowlie was steeped in French language and literature.

> I had never heard of Wallace Fowlie until I read his essay, entitled "Narcissus," in *View*. At once I felt that I had come into contact with a mind that was intact and a spirit that was pure.[66]

Miller saw a profound unity between himself and Fowlie in their catholicism and their religious nature—traits Blaise Cendrars had noticed in the first ever-published essay about Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, in *Orbes*, in 1935. Miller wrote of Fowlie:

> In this realm of criticism I am one of his most passionate admirers. In reading him I feel that I am being 'instructed,' using that word in the highest sense… It is Mr. Fowlie's special gift to remind us that the amplitude the tolerance and the clarity of the true catholic spirit are still alive.

Henry Miller complimented the beauty of Wallace Fowlie's writing. The two men soon became friends. They corresponded regularly throughout the 1940s and then occasionally until Miller's death. During Miller's lifetime, Fowlie would be one of his

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staunchest defenders and most perceptive critics. Sadly for posterity, Fowlie would also make a terrible blunder after Miller's death by authenticating the script of *Opus Pistorum* as being by Miller, when it was a fake. Gershon Legman tried to convince Fowlie to retract, but he stubbornly refused. Wallace Fowlie and Henry Miller got to know each other only nine years after *Tropic of Cancer* first appeared. Before hearing from Miller, Fowlie had already read *Tropic of Cancer* and *The Cosmological Eye*. He read widely in French and was certainly aware of Miller's growing reputation in France, from 1946, and banned status in America. Fowlie was on the verge of a stellar career as a translator, critic and scholar of French literature, but during these early years Miller's encouragement was vitally important to him. Fowlie was one of the first American academics of stature to praise Miller. He likened Miller to both Rabelais and St. Francis, and wrote of him as "the best rounded writer we have." Miller subsequently visited Fowlie at Yale, where he was teaching, for two weeks in the fall of 1944. It was here that Miller gave a series of informal talks to some of Fowlie's students, which led to someone denouncing him to the FBI. It was also indirectly through Fowlie that Miller met a graduate student of philosophy, whom he would marry soon after, Martha Janina Lepska.

Wallace Fowlie was moved by Henry Miller as a person. His descriptions of Miller in everyday guise are a sharp corrective to impressions of Miller as "gangster author." Fowlie recalled:

> When we finally settled down in the living room, he spoke with that deepest kind of grace that comes from a concern with what is most central in the person addressed… Somehow in Henry Miller the art of learning is carried out by immediacy, by an act of love, a joining of himself with the subject… His kindness and attentiveness were overwhelming. I had never before observed

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> a man able to remain so alert and fervent in every aspect of living and thinking. Through simply proximity, I felt a new vigor in myself.

At Yale, Miller also met Fowlie's friend, and Head of Department, Henri Peyre, who had also been one of the first important critics in America to praise Miller and state his importance.[67] Henry Miller was, while visiting Fowlie, offered $1,000 to give a formal lecture at Jonathan Edwards College. Although he badly needed the money, Miller was too shy and refused. Fowlie wrote of Miller as:

> … A leading example of a special kind of writer who is essentially seer and prophet, whose immediate ancestor was Rimbaud and whose leading exponent was D.H. Lawrence… What characterizes this kind of writer is his vulnerability to experiences… In a more histrionic sense, this artist is the scapegoat who feels physically the weight of the world's sins and who performs in his life the role of the clown. He relives all the incarnations of the hero, which he calls, in his more modest language, his masks. Miller was also fascinated by the names Rimbaud used for himself in *Une saison en enfer*… acrobat, beggar, artist, bandit, priest.

Fowlie linked Miller explicitly to a French tradition of the prophetic and visionary writer identified as *voyou* or *mendiant* and clown. This linking of seeming opposites was an association made by a variety of nineteenth century writers including Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Lautréamont and The Brothers Goncourt. It was a famous Symbolist conceit. The duality in these men, who were both religious writers and social outcasts, fascinated Fowlie. It became the partial subject of three of his

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books and many of his discussions with Henry Miller. The fruit of these discussions, for Miller, was a renewed interest in this aspect of French literature and art. Fowlie referred often to painting in his works—sometimes, great works of art were used to illustrate them. Over three years, Miller's interest in Fowlie's favorite themes of the time would combine with other influences to determine the style of composition of *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder.* Fowlie would always insist that Miller was a prime example of artist as prophet. He would describe Miller's artistic work as "choreographic" and write:

> The heroes whom Henry Miller talks about the most often are the same type of passionate clown: Rimbaud and Lawrence, Chaplin and Raimu, Christ and St. Francis, Miller himself as hero in *Tropic of Cancer.*

What Miller had achieved, Fowlie asserted, was to interrupt the tradition of American literature that was obsessed with evil and the malefic and iniquitous in relation to morality. American writers had:

> An uninterrupted preoccupation with the theme of evil, treated from a special viewpoint of horror and awesomeness… conception of evil as being a sense of dark foreboding and the plotting of malign spirits.

It was the violence of Miller's prose, Fowlie asserted, that had been needed to "redirect the American consciousness of evil." It was this radical departure from the American tradition—in fact an injection of the French and Spanish catholic tradition into the vein of American Puritan literature that Durrell referred to when he wrote, "American literature begins and ends with the meaning of what Miller has done."

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Wallace Fowlie also identified the essential persona of the man/actor/artist as a clown that felt unable to react normally in the presence of women. This was, in the modern world, a reference to a particularly American form of adulation and thralldom of women, which came to see women as goddesses who must be put upon a pedestal and served. In the French and Italian traditions, this idea had existed in a different form in the love poems of the Troubadours and the mythical status attributed to figures such as Dante's Béatrice or Petrarch's Laura. In England, it was especially dominant among late nineteenth century Pre-Raphaelites. All of this deification of woman had a strong impact on Miller's personal life. This idealization, and his rebellion from it, was a prominent driving force behind his work. Much of Miller's writing was an effort to free both him and society from the thralldom of the hypnotic power of the feminine. D. H. Lawrence (with Jessie Chambers) and Miller (with Cora Seward) had begun their lives deifying women (putting them on a pedestal) and rejecting the sexual act as base. Both broke the chains that bound them through the intervention of an older woman—Lawrence with Bertha Coutts and Miller with Pauline Chouteau. Wallace Fowlie wrote of:

> The long line of heroes, extending from Hamlet to Charlie Chaplin, who have been awkward in the presence of women and unable to express themselves in love, have developed in woman a false role of domination which D.H. Lawrence was among the first to castigate. Lawrence was devoted to love, Miller is devoted to life, but both have expressed fear of women's role in the modern world and her usurping of man's position. Hence their treatment of women, to undermine her role…

Fowlie believed that, although both Miller and Lawrence had sought to restore a natural balance to the relation between

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the sexes, they had reacted excessively, missed the mark and consequently failed. Thus, their work had become "another perversion… comparable to man's excessive love for his mother, as in Proust, and the excessive hate for his mother, as in Rimbaud." Fowlie identified Miller unequivocally as a visionary writer and a seer in the French mould. Like other visionary writers, such as Blake, Rouault and Rimbaud, Miller "identifies with the poor, the wretched, the unknown of the world." Fowlie said that in another age Miller would have probably become a monk or Gnostic, and revealed how Miller's close friends had always seen in him "the same man in his roles as *clown* and *angel*." Fowlie identified one of the most important aspects of Miller's work—the idea that Christianity, especially in Puritan America, had created an opposition between body and spirit that did not exist in other cultures or religions, or in pre-Protestant Christianity.

Henry Miller rejected Puritanism absolutely. His own notion of religion was closely linked to Theosophy, Hinduism and Buddhism. He was especially close to Hinduism, which often portrayed the sexual in its religious art. Fowlie would remark on the Hindu comparison, as would Miller when he was assisting lawyer Elmer Gertz to prepare his case for defending *Tropic of Cancer* in court. Miller, familiar as he was with the vast contribution of Hinduism to Greek and Arab thought and American Transcendentalism, would write that "India has been affecting the ways and thought of Westerners without cease… She is the mother of all the sciences, all the arts, all the philosophies of life."[68] Miller saw the spirit of Hinduism as aspiring to peace, simplicity and the unity and brotherhood of Mankind. These were the ideals to which Miller's mature work aspired. The "Brotherhood of Fools and Simpletons" that Miller describes in *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* deliberately linked holiness with clowns, fools and idiots (and with a Hindu). Miller associated "idiots" with good and sanctity, as in the case of Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. As Fowlie pointed out, the real everyday Henry Miller was timid and insecure with women. He was, in

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fact, afraid of them and of their beauty, of their closeness to Nature, which he believed gave them a preternatural strength and ultimate ambivalence towards men. Miller's insecurity and timidity with women, he believed, made him appear like a fool. He identified with characters in the works of Knut Hamsun that experienced similar trepidation when confronted by women.

Henry Miller's friendship with Wallace Fowlie developed not only out of a serious engagement with each other's writing, but also with their shared passion for French Symbolist literature and for writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Charles Baudelaire, Jules Laforgue, Paul Verlaine, Jean Cocteau, Isidore Ducasse, Max Jacob and Arthur Rimbaud. During 1943-46, both writers were reading and writing about Rimbaud extensively. Fowlie wrote of Rimbaud in *Clowns and Angels*, which Miller reviewed (*Chimera* autumn 1944). Fowlie subsequently also corresponded with Michael Fraenkel, who was also obsessed with Rimbaud, at Miller's suggestion.

In January 1944, Miller sent Fowlie one of his recent clown paintings. It was a natural gesture for Miller because of the great admiration he felt upon reading *Clowns and Angels*. Writing about Fowlie's book, Miller described it as a rare critical book, free from malice and envy. Rather than strictly a book of academic criticism, it was, like Miller's study of Lawrence, a passionate appreciation of great French writers— Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Claudel. Miller wrote that Fowlie had a gift of "detecting, in the writers he treats of, not only what is eternal in their work but what is usable in everyday life." Miller would compare Fowlie, in his writing, to both a mariner and a musician and noted that:

> The facets of approach employed in these studies of eminent French writers are like so many shimmering planes in which are mirrored our deepest reflections whose transience is swift as lightning.

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In Miller's responses to Fowlie's writing (1944-47), we see the genesis of many of the ideas that would resurface in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. These include musical motifs, clowns, the mariner (and indirectly his albatross) and the multi-facetted, multi-plane images that had long interested Miller. This multiple-plane vision he had explored in his study of works of Cubist art (notably Picasso), the prose of Gertrude Stein (about whom Miller wrote an unpublished essay in 1933) and in French literature, such as Jean Bruller's *Un homme coupé en tranches*. Bruller and these others had deeply impacted Miller's writing in the early 1930s, notably during the writing of *Black Spring*.

Henry Miller wrote to Wallace Fowlie on January 29th 1944 that Fowlie was obviously "catholic—with a small 'c'." This was what Miller claimed he aspired to be. This attitude encompassed a universal religious spirit that was non-judgmental. It was closer to Hinduism than to the reality of the modern Catholic Church, which tried to eradicate pagan elements in response to the wide appeal of Protestantism. Miller wished to "practice his art in living." He told Fowlie that he had no respect for writers who did not share this aim. Miller had, during late 1943 and 1944, undergone another spiritual awakening akin to that he had experienced in Greece in late 1939. This had evolved out of a period, in late summer 1943, when he had felt as if "my ego was almost annihilated." This trauma was caused by the end of Miller's relationship with Greek poet Sevasty Koutsaftis, about whom Miller would write to Durrell, "God, how I loved her!"[69] Echoing the Old Testament God, Miller would tell Fowlie that he finally now knew, by early 1944, "I AM THAT I AM." This epiphany was coincidental for Miller with his journey along the coast to Monterey, near Big Sur. In *Remember to Remember*, Miller would describe Monterey as resembling "a picturesque fishing village in the south of France."

On March 1st 1944, Miller told Fowlie of his recent decision to move to Big Sur, to "go into retreat." In February, Bern Porter (in Berkeley) had asked Fowlie to contribute to his book of

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tributes to Miller entitled *The Happy Rock*, for which Fernand Léger provided the cover drawing.[70] Fowlie would draw particular attention to the "brilliant" *Hamlet* Correspondence between Miller and Fraenkel.[71] He spoke of the centrality of love and the divine in Miller's work:

> The love of the visionary is his vision. And God is at the end of his vision, although not always visible, as God is the innermost being of every man, although very often not discovered there.

Paris was liberated from Nazi control on August 25th 1944. The Allied move to free Paris had been inevitable since the D-day landings of June 6th 1944. Miller wrote extensively on France throughout 1944-45 in response to public interest in the freedom of the French. In autumn 1944, he published "Let Us be Content with New-Born Elephants" about Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse). In this essay, Miller had confronted one of the great anti-hero figures of French literature, lineal descendent of the Marquis de Sade. Miller spoke of Lautréamont's *Maldoror* as dealing "almost exclusively with God and the Omnipotent. God in man, man in God and the Devil take the hindmost. But always God." Miller wrote that God had a central role in composing *Maldoror*, just as he did in the socially unacceptable works of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, so often attacked by Christian moralists. *Maldoror* was an important book to Henry Miller because (like *Tropic of Cancer*) it was written without concessions—Lautréamont "asked no quarter and he gave none." Miller saw Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Lautréamont as "sanctified" figures. He called them, echoing W.B. Yeats, "angels in disguise." He likened *Maldoror*, as he did his own work, to a "new Bible."[72] Miller wrote: "The style, the effect, the intent, everything about this black Bible is monstrous. So is the image of Kali… And so finally and inevitably is the Creator seen here from below."[73] Already in 1944 (as in his

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1930s auto-fictions), we perceive Henry Miller's strong identification with rebel artists and those who are blasphemous, with the French sacred tradition and with Hinduism.

Miller's article on Lautréamont was followed, in 1945, by essays such as "Vive la France," "The Spirit of France," "On French Wartime Literature" and "Leading Books of the Occupation Period." Miller also placed a large chapter on France in the second volume of *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* called "Remember to Remember." This became the title piece of the volume when it appeared in 1947.[74] Miller attempted to translate Rimbaud in 1945. This led to his rapidly writing his study *The Time of the Assassins*, which would appear in fragments in 1946 and as a book in 1956.[75] Miller wrote a Preface, in 1955, in which he stated: "The impressive thing about the leading poets of the nineteenth century, and the twentieth as well, is their prophetic strain." Speaking of Rimbaud, he drew the parallel between the poet and religion:

> There is no discrepancy between his vision of the world, and of life eternal, and of that of the great religious innovators.

Miller stated that he believed that the appearance of Rimbaud, who had called for every day to be "Christmas on Earth," was "just as miraculous" as in "the awakening of Gautama, or in Christ's acceptance of the Cross, or in Joan of Arc's incredible mission of deliverance." When Fowlie reviewed *The Time of the Assassins*, he would describe the book as being, rather than a biography or study of Rimbaud, "Miller's autobiography."[76] Miller admitted to seeing, in Rimbaud, himself in a mirror. He described Rimbaud's language as "music rather than literature," and his life as "a Calvary." He was "a man who was looking for paradise in one form or another." Miller even likened Rimbaud to D.H. Lawrence, with whom he also strongly identified. He described Rimbaud in terms of schizophrenia and as a man

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"who faces two ways always"—like a clown. Miller and Rimbaud both sought, he claimed, a "union of art with life." Miller would clearly state his religious beliefs when he wrote:

> This God who is man's strength is neither a Christian god nor a pagan god. He is simply God. He is accessible to all men of whatever race, creed or culture. He may be found in any place and at any time, without benefit of mediation. He is creation itself and will continue to exist whether man believes or not.

Miller's vision of the divine force, rooted in Hinduism, exemplified an all-inclusive (hence catholic) sense of religion. *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* described one man's release from the world of illusion or Maia and his journey towards, and arrival at, this universal vision. The distinction arising between Miller's catholic spirit and his frequent attacks on the Catholic Church, are explained by Fowlie as "his lack of honesty in acknowledging the efforts of the Church and individuals in the Church to purify the world." Fowlie was a Catholic covert, who staunchly defended the Church. Here, he and Miller diverged. Miller had detested the Catholic Church since his encounter with it as a child, when staying with the Imhoff family. His visits to Lourdes and other religious sites had reinforced his impression of the Catholic Church as corrupt, hypocritical and spiritually bankrupt, "an eye-sore." Yet, within the Church itself Miller found men he grew to love and admire, such as Thomas Merton. Writing of the destiny of the creative individual, Miller described his vision of the artist and God united in music and song. This image appeared in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* and many of his other works, beginning with *Tropic of Cancer*:

> Man creates nothing of and by himself. All is created. All has been foreseen. Freedom to sing

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> God's praises. This is the highest performance man can enact; when he takes his place by the side of the Creator. This is his liberty and salvation, since it is the only way to say 'Yea' to life. God wrote the score, God conducts the orchestra. Man's role is to make music with his own body. Heavenly music, *bien entendu*, for all else is cacophony.

Henry Miller believed that the greatest miracle was that which Hinduism sought, the unity of all men. He asserted: "it is our mission on earth to combat false teaching by manifesting the truth which is in us. Even single-handed we can accomplish miracles… The key is Charity."[77] He meant charity in the sense of love. Love in the sense that "God is Love" and love is surrender of the ego. We, like Rimbaud, should "resume where the Orient, in its splendor, left off." If Miller sang, "out of key," for us in *Tropic of Cancer*, it was to satirize and contribute to the destruction of, our inharmonious world. By the 1940s, and his writing of *The Time of the Assassins* and *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, his song was of a very different kind. Even though Henry Miller's song had changed form and tonality over the years, writers Blaise Cendrars, Colette Roberts and Lawrence Durrell had realized, already by 1935, that Miller's voice had always been musical. His message had always been religious.

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Part 6

During the early years of their correspondence, Henry Miller would stress to Wallace Fowlie that he should not ignore the "evil in me." He also explained the identification he felt with Tibetan Lamas and Hindus:

> What strikes me in the Tibetan and Hindu sages is their tremendous sense of Reality—something unshakable, and as corrosive and devastating (for those who cannot bear the light) as nitroglycerine. These men are rocks—but they also know how to melt down with love, as Vivekananda so well said.

In April 1944, Wallace Fowlie explained to Henry Miller that Miller himself was a subject of the early part of his manuscript of *The Clown's Grail*. Miller, impressed with Fowlie's writing, told him, on June 21st 1944:

> You are the only man I know of, writing today, who understands the singular, mystical relationship between the clown, voyou, and the angel in man… When you touch on this theme you make me delirious.

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Henry Miller would soon put Wallace Fowlie in touch with Anaïs Nin. He sent him a copy of a manuscript by Conrad Moricand, entitled *Les Traces du Culte d'Isis*, which dealt with religious iconography. Miller also (surprisingly) introduced Fowlie to Honoré de Balzac's *Séraphita*, which had a great impact on *Smile*. Fowlie's writings had meantime encouraged Miller to return to reading Max Jacob. When Miller heard about the liberation of Paris, his first instinct was to return to the city. Within a year, his meeting with Lepska, his marriage and Lepska's first pregnancy, would change everything. Returning to Europe was out of the question.

Henry Miller read widely in spiritual literature during the 1940s. One of his main unsung influences was Gustav Fechner's *Life after Death,* which had first appeared in America with an introduction by William James. Miller drew parallels between himself and Fechner, who was, like Miller, depressive and obsessed with angels and the divine spirit, and also a musician. Gustav Fechner saw death as another kind of birth. He identified a soul in plants and animals. His ideas were derived from Hinduism. He identified the notion of *limina* or threshold of consciousness. He saw earthly life as one of dream or illusion, like the Hindu Maia, from which we can awaken in the "afterlife." Each soul had a Higher Self and potentially several sublives or reincarnations. We were, Fechner believed, capable of living multiple lives simultaneously. We were imprisoned in the illusory notion of linear time and our ill-defined conception of space. In reality, Fechner argued, time and space ideas of his age and Judeo-Christian culture (his book appeared in 1837) were false and illusory. We are timeless and part of the divine, he asserted. These ideas were deeply resonant with Miller, who had long ago integrated them into his work via his study of Indian religions. Fechner, like Miller and the Hindus, saw divine presence in all things. He believed the entire material universe, including the stars, had a consciousness and a soul. He also believed, like Sinnett, that in each generation on earth there

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were spiritual messengers and leaders who could point the way forward for society and mankind in general. This idea was emphasized in another book that Miller identified with closely—Algernon Blackwood's *The Bright Messenger* (1921), which Miller read again in 1944. Blackwood's book speaks of personalities that are part human part angel, who can, when the world is ready for their message, help heal humanity and point them in the direction of union with the divine. The book had been written to address the particular suffering of the world at the end of the Great War. It was natural, towards the end of World War Two, that Miller would return to this theme and write his own version of the Swedenborg-Fechner-Balzac-Blackwood vision, which was steeped in Hinduism. Part of the substance of Fechner's construct was seeing the world as a "womb." This image was one Miller would return to several times in his work, from *Black Spring* onwards. Henry Miller said:

> I love this picture of the universe. It is one of life. Nothing but life. Life in the womb, life in the world, life in the beyond—nothing but life. It is strange how man accepted death before life. Interprets life through death. I think I've said this before, but let me say it again—the Bodhisattva is the greatest figure the human spirit has conceived of. The Renouncer! How I adore that idea. I am the one who hopes to be incarnated over and over again.

The Bodhisattva is Hindu in origin. His concern is not strictly with himself, but with all of humanity and all creation. Miller would portray the journey of discovery of a Bodhisattva in his clown Auguste in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. Gautama the Buddha had been a Bodhisattva before attaining Buddhahood. Hindus and Buddhists see Christ as a Bodhisattva. Miller would return to the vision of the Hindu as his true brother and

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his fellow member of "The Brotherhood of Fools and Simpletons" in *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*. Things the Hindu and Miller are seen to share in this book are laughter, clowning and child-like simplicity.

In September 1944, Henry Miller wrote to Wallace Fowlie addressing him as a "mentor, guide, consoler, and confessor." He was, Miller claimed in a moment of isolation and sadness, "the only man on this continent whom I feel really close to." Miller's sense of loneliness was palpable. He was, however, immersed in Hinduism and Buddhism at this time, as he had been for many years. Speaking of one of his favorite Hindu figures, Miller told Fowlie:

> Why do I love Ramakrishna so much (rather than Jesus, rather than the Buddha himself, even)—because he flung himself at God perpetually, an uninterrupted assault. This is the real *acte gratuit* that men like Gide and the Surrealists overlook. The only *acte gratuit*. Murder is all right—as literary ipecac, but murder is nothing compared to the ecstatic love of the divine.[78]

Wallace Fowlie had not sent Miller a complete draft of his book *The Clown's Grail* as yet, but Henry tacked up the list of contents by his kitchen sink "to study and dream over." The one thing Henry missed in his shack in Big Sur was music. He was discovering the isolation of this remote coastal region and all the manifestations of nature he was so unused to—such as stepping on rattlesnakes in the dark. On his walks at night, the one thing that gave him comfort was the moon. He would often stare at it. This image later focused his mind on Miró's canvas "Dog Barking at the Moon" (an act he witnessed from his own dog often in Big Sur) and provided a central image of *Smile*. When he reached the top of the coastal ridge, Henry was standing above the clouds, as if in Tibet or in heaven.

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Henry Miller visited Wallace Fowlie at Trumball College, Yale in late September/early October 1944. He left for New York on October 11th, but before doing so left his friend a note, in which he told him that during his stay:

> Your writings have touched me at my most vulnerable place, at the point where I balance myself between a life as one of the 'elect' and my chosen life, perhaps my destined life… If I dare say it, I feel I have lived with God these last few days. The passages of your writing that made me cry were those that led me in the direction of God. I absolve you of all efforts to convert me (unconsciously). You seduce me, as the great spirits do—that's all. You give me the courage to love and to believe. If you ever have hard or difficult times ahead, count on me. I will make a place for you wherever I am in the world and I will defend you against the world.[79]

Throughout their correspondence of the 1940s, Henry Miller and Wallace Fowlie would return frequently to Miller's identification with figures in French literature, notably Rimbaud. Miller cited Rimbaud, stating that like the poet "*je me suis rendu au sol, moi qui me disais mage.*" Miller and his soon-to-be wife, Lepska, went to stay with Emil Schnellock in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in the second week of December. Miller had to walk eight miles each day to the room where he wrote. He was becoming obsessed, in the aftermath of discussions with Fowlie, with the idea of Christ after the resurrection. Miller married Lepska on December 17th 1944 in Boulder, Colorado, on a circuitous route back to Big Sur. They traveled in Colorado as a mini-honeymoon. Henry had in the previous weeks realized that his style of writing was about to change radically. His natural style from now on would be spiritual, as in *The Colossus of Maroussi.*

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He told Fowlie on January 8th 1945: "I am sick of dragging my old (unreal) carcass around in novels." Henry's reading was also tending more and more towards the spiritual: Paul Claudel, G.K. Chesterton's *Life of St. Francis*, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* and *Death and the Lover*, and the religious and sacred obsessions referred to in Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony*.[80] Fowlie wrote often to Miller about religious subjects and about the slow death of their mutual friend, Jess Clark, which resembled a Calvary.

By February 1945, Lawrence Durrell (in Alexandria) had read Fowlie's *Clowns and Angels* (which Miller sent him). Durrell found Fowlie's work "absolutely marvelous." Fowlie had difficulty placing his next book *The Clown's Grail*. Miller believed that they were living in an age when closing one's eyes to truth was almost essential to humanity, because what was visible or had recently happened (such as the Holocaust) was so traumatic. Miller felt he was "a sinner and renegade." He had come to realize that to wish to be accepted and lauded in his own time was a sign of "weakness." He disliked most of his readers. He believed he was writing for the distant future. The current age was one "sick and poisoned…." "I don't think there could be an age of less faith. And it is this which is killing us," Miller wrote to Fowlie. The only answer was to "put yourself in God's hands."[81] Reading widely about France in order to write book reviews, Miller felt "desperate about my separation from Europe." He felt as if he were living in a cultural and spiritual desert in America. He intended to write (and later did) a tribute to France in *Remember to Remember,* that would express his love of France, and its values. Miller planned a third volume of *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*. This was intended, by April 1945, to portray a vision of utopia: "I have the germ of a brilliant idea—the depiction of the Utopia America has dreamed of becoming (and well may become a thousand years hence)." This is the book that Miller would write, years later, as *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*.[82]

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In May 1945, Wallace Fowlie was asked by *View* to write on Max Jacob, of whom he wrote to Henry Miller as "a clown and an angel." Miller was simultaneously reading Antoine de St-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* and *Pilote de guerre*. The style of St-Exupéry's parable and religiously charged prose would influence *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. Throughout the remainder of 1945, Miller worked on *The Time of the Assassins* as well as on various other projects: *Remember to Remember*, essays and articles, and on revising *Sexus*. When their daughter Valentine was born on November 19th 1945, Henry and Lepska Miller named Wallace Fowlie as her godfather. While waiting for Valentine to be born, Miller had been reading about the Tibetan saint Milarepa, with whom he identified. He was also in the process of identifying strong links between Rimbaud and the Balzac of *Séraphita*. Henry intended to return to *The Rosy Crucifixion* in 1946. In late 1945 he was living with Lepska in one room, sharing a cabin with Margaret Neiman and her baby. Miller had also begun to write to Herman Hesse.

In October 1945, and the months that followed, Wallace Fowlie read everything he could find on painter Georges Rouault in preparation for his next book, *Jacob's Night* (1947). Miller told Fowlie that Rouault, like Utrillo, was one of the greats for him—they "always make me weep when I read of them." Rouault was especially famous for his clown and Christ paintings. Miller had, in the meantime, begun regular conversations with Christian Science practitioner Jean Wharton. Henry described her as "the nearest in female form I have ever met to being a Yogi. She talks (or rather radiates) Reality!" While Lepska Miller was in labor with Valentine, she had read *Séraphita*. Both Henry and Lepska would identify their daughter with "an angel" and Balzac's creation.[83]

On February 10th 1946, Henry Miller wrote to Wallace Fowlie about a discovery he had mentioned some weeks before—it was an epiphany concerning the days between the resurrection of Christ and his ascension. Miller felt that his revelation was so

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important that he could not even talk about it, but rather had to "live my life in the light of it." He had found corroboration of his discovery in the life and writings of Krishnamurti and Milarepa. It was not something he could discuss because it was something too personal, outside of churches and doctrines. It was an experience one had to live through in order to understand it, like a religious vision or conversion. Miller was reminded of an incident he had recounted in *The Colossus of Maroussi*, in which a "soothsayer" had told him (in Athens) that he would never die. He felt sure that he now had an inkling of what this could really mean. Henry was, for the moment, feeling happy and at peace. "There is here a quality of the eternal which I have felt nowhere else except in Greece." The ideas on the life of Christ Miller had developed would resurface, merged with Hindu teachings and other sources, in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*.[84] French critics had already begun to comment openly, during the furor over the *Cas Miller*, on Miller's religious intent. His old friend from the 1930s in Paris, Claudine Chonez, wrote one of his favorite pieces, in 1946, "Henry Miller du pan-sexualisme à angélisme." 1947 was the year of Georges Villa's religious vision of *Henry Miller et l'amour*. It was the first full-length book on Miller in French. By 1947, Miller's reputation in France was enormous. He was a massive bestseller in French and English in Paris. He had been widely praised by dozens of French critics, as well as defended by Jean-Paul Sartre, André Gide, Albert Camus, Jean Paulhan and Simone de Beauvoir.

Henry Miller read *Jacob's Night* by Wallace Fowlie during the time when he was trying to begin *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*.[85] In his Epilogue to *Smile*, Miller would talk about the impact of this book, which contained Fowlie's essay on the clowns of Rouault. Miller revealed that he was strongly influenced by Rouault's life and work. He had long since begun, as a result of Fowlie's obsession with clowns (he mentions of them in several volumes), to reflect on "the clown that I am, which I have always been" and to reveal his great passion for the circus,

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especially the *cirque intime*. Henry's experiences of these shows had remained embedded in his subconscious. He even claimed that when he had been asked what he would become on leaving high school, he had replied "a circus clown." Miller would say that many of his closest friends behaved like clowns and looked upon him as often acting like a clown. One friend in particular, who came to his mind, was certainly Alfred Perlès, with whom he had spent many evenings of uproarious laughter during his Paris years.[86]

Wallace Fowlie had written *Clowns and Angels* and *The Clown's Grail*, both of which, by their titles and ideas, impacted Miller deeply. Henry wrote:

> Balzac had spoken to me of the angels (in Louis Lambert) and, through Fowlie's numerous divagations on the clown, I had gained a new insight into the role of the clown. Clowns and angels are so divinely suited to each other.

Throughout his work, Henry Miller would identify angels with both innocence and the divine. He uses the term "angel" to describe innocents who lack knowledge of sin, such as his retarded sister Lauretta and his insane Tante Melia (in *Black Spring*). When Conrad Moricand had cast Miller's horoscope in 1936, he had described Miller's personal symbol as "an angel surrounded by flames." Miller would describe himself as both "an innocent" and "an angel." His use of "angel" had more than one signification. Angels are above all messengers of God and those spirits who fight on the side of truth. Angels can be far from "angelic." They can be warriors and avengers and wreak tremendous violence in the name of truth and the divine. Henry Miller intended all of these meanings when he referred to himself as "angelic." After all, Lucifer and his cohorts were angels fallen from grace, who could only be matched and bested by the strength, faith and violence of the loyal angelic hosts.

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Henry Miller had written about and painted clown-like characters, such as Auguste Angst and Guy le Crêvecœur. He asked: "Who were they, these two anguished, frustrated, desperate souls, if not myself?" He identified with both the clown and the Holy man, who were at heart one and the same. Miller claimed that his most successful painting, until 1947, was one in which he painted a clown with two mouths "one for joy, one for sorrow." This Janus image might have been a self-portrait of his schizophrenic inner world. It was symbolic of the duality at the heart of modern life and which he sensed in himself and modern visionary writers and artists.

Henry Miller composed *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* in late spring and early summer 1947. Miller had been commissioned primarily because of his great fame in France at that time. Yet he had written something that was ultimately rejected because it was so strongly the opposite of what both his publishers and readers of books like *Tropic of Cancer* and *Black Spring* expected. The text and Léger's paintings were due to be published together in a very expensive limited edition by Tériade. Each copy was destined to cost over $100. It was a collectors-only project. In *Jacob's Night*, Fowlie had explored figures that Miller was emotionally drawn to because of their religious quest. These included religious philosopher, Jacques Maritain. Maritain had been on the same boat as Miller when he returned to America in January 1940. Another was Charles Péguy, whom Miller had cited in his *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* and who spoke about the debasement caused to individuals by modern life. There was also Rouault, whose paintings and writings had a profound influence on *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. The essence of *Smile* was to be found, Miller revealed, in Fowlie's statement in the last lines of *Jacob's Night*:

> The clown's vocation is partly angelic. He causes laughter through understanding the source of joy and through acting the innocence of man.

Miller told Fowlie: "that is exactly the core of my story."

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Henry Miller sent Wallace Fowlie a carbon of *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, at Fowlie's request, on July 5th 1947. On July 12th he asked Fowlie, when he was finished with the script, to send *Smile* on to Lawrence Durrell in London. Léger had just written from Paris saying the clown story was unacceptable. He asked Miller to write a new text, which was, said Miller, "exactly what I feared would happen." Fowlie was moved by *Smile*. He suggested to Miller that he could write about it in his next book of criticism. Léger had found the text "too psychological and subtle." He asked for something instead in the style of the *Tropics*. Miller told Léger he would try and asked him to reconsider. Miller was disappointed because Léger had been asking to him to collaborate on a project for several years. His primary influence had been the clowns of Rouault as he experienced them and as he saw them through Fowlie's writing. In the end, Miller and Léger's collaboration did not materialize.

Joan Miró's "Dog Barking at the Moon" had come to Miller's mind as a symbol not only because of his own nightly walks in Big Sur, but also because of its parallels in Lautréamont's *Maldoror*. Miller had re-read the book in order to write "Let Us Be Content with Three Little Newborn Elephants," which appeared again in *Of, by & about Henry Miller*, published in June 1947. Miró's painting had been subject to many influences, which also obsessed Miller. These included dream worlds, the nature of time and seasonality. Miró was, in the light of Einstein, exploring new concepts of space and different kinds of spatial horizon. This particular painting by Miró explored symbolically the ability of man to transcend his animal nature on earth and to reach up (along his multi-colored ladder) to heaven and unity with the divine. The essence of Miró's painting is simplicity of form and minimal color. The ladder is representative of the steps and path of "the way" in a similar sense that Christ and the angels or the Bodhisattva are. The ladder brings about unity of the earthly and divine and provides an intermediary between them. The ladder is not one direction, but two ways, just like

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the stairs which the angels in the Bible (such as in the Jacob story and Revelation) take between Heaven and earth. Miró had taken this spiritual direction in his work soon after painting a series of harlequins and clowns.

Georges Seurat's paintings of the Cirque Medrano were also on Henry Miller's mind. Seurat's art was strongly permeated by a sense of music and dance. He was influenced by Richard Wagner's ideas on music as conveying a moral and spiritual purpose. Wagner had sought not to write operas but rather to convey a religious and mystical experience comprising "total art." Both Wagner and the Symbolists, with whom Miller was very familiar, experienced music as a religious form linked intrinsically to the divine. Wagner had written in an *essai* on Beethoven, that, "music is not merely an art, but a holy art, a religion." Echoes of prior religious art and of music were a prominent element of Seurat's compositions. The images Miller includes in *Smile* of tiers of spectators or later figures in Purgatory, representing all walks of society, are derived from Seurat's *Le Cirque* and from Dante. The circus in Paris was not only a place of entertainment but also a place like Seurat's "La Grand Jatte" where all the diverse elements of society could come into close proximity. Circuses were a favorite haunt of prostitutes. Some of the female circus performers (such as *écuyères*) were also sought for sex by the wealthy, just as dancers or taxi dancers were elsewhere. The costumes of clowns in Paris were often painted with images of the moon, sun or stars. The tile floor of the Cirque Medrano also contained images of stars.

Many critics, beginning with Fénéon, have seen Seurat's Circus painting as a highly symbolic one, in which the clown stands for the painter or artist in front of a society that does not understand his message. He is also symbolic of a religious figure, such as a Christ, who is rejected and crucified by his age. His mien is tragicomic, like the two faced figure (comedy-tragedy) of ancient Greek theater. The circus arena in this painting

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becomes an enchanted circle of creativity, of music and holiness. The clown is the key figure, holding the curtain, which can mask this holy space from the view of the spectator. The entire composition is musical and resembles ballet. A central image is that of the white horse, that reappears in *Smile*. The female riding on the horse's back is all dressed in yellow-gold. She suggests when she turns her somersaults, the golden mane of Miller's white horse. The image resembles that of Bérénice and her Golden Mane.[87] Seurat's *Le Cirque* is founded in musical composition and Symbolist color theory.

Henry Miller also drew attention to the importance of Seurat's "La Grand Jatte" to him. The painting was in part, like much of Miller's own work, a satire on *bourgeois* society and established social and religious values. The painting reminded Miller of some of the time spent with his parents on Sundays as a child. Again, like the Circus, this venue is a place where all walks of life and social classes can come together. Throughout his work, Miller emphasizes the cityscapes and venues, like the dance halls, circuses, cafés, cinemas, streets, urinals, public parks, bike races, train stations and Coney Island, *quais de la Seine*, where all the diverse elements that make up humanity can encounter one another as equals. This was Miller's love affair with the street and communal public gatherings. These are the places where humanity is on display, available and not segregated by convention, religion, color, occupation or class. Seurat was a visionary painter who, like Hieronymus Bosch before him, hid his symbols and intent behind a façade that his public could not see beyond. In this and other ways, notably by his adhesion to musical form, he was dear to Miller, who saw his own writing as having a profound moral and religious purpose that society was largely, if not totally, oblivious to.[88]

Georges Rouault is one of the great religious artists of the twentieth century. He felt himself by inclination to be a stained-glass maker (he apprenticed as one) or manual craftsman, such as those who created the glass and sculpture masterpieces he

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loved in French cathedrals. His attitude to art was medieval and catholic. He identified the artist as a Christ-like figure and said that he aspired to paint in colors that had the purity of flames (like the fire of the Holy Spirit). Like Miller, Rouault generally tried to steer clear of critics and scholars, once writing that:

> A painter who loves his art should carefully avoid spending too much time with critics and literary people. These individuals, probably unintentionally, deform things by trying to explain everything, taking thought, will, and artistic sensitivities and shearing them just as Delilah sheared Samson.

Jacques Maritain (about whom Fowlie wrote in *Jacob's Night*) wrote a book on Rouault, *Georges Rouault, peintre et lithographe (*Éditions Polyglotte, Frapier, 1926, American edition, Abrams 1954). Rouault's work shows an overwhelming engagement with themes of suffering and salvation, with clowns and depictions of the artist as clown or Christ. He was frequently inspired by music (his wife was a musician). He designed the sets for Diaghilev's ballet *The Prodigal Son* in 1929. Rouault was also close to men whose work touched Miller—he was a friend of Henri Matisse, whom Miller wrote about at length in *Tropic of Cancer*, and of Joris Karl Huysmans, whom Miller admired. Rouault, once the favorite student of Gustave Moreau, sometimes shared common techniques and themes with another Post-Expressionist artist who influenced Miller—George Grosz. Miller had originally hoped Grosz would illustrate *Tropic of Cancer*. Miller was also once described as "the George Grosz of literature." Like Miller, Rouault combined brutal satire with a profoundly religious vision. His forms are, like those of all Miller's favorite painters, highly symbolic.

One of the strongest points of confluence between Miller and Rouault was their common identification with the poor, working

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class, the marginalized and the underprivileged. Each of them identified with Christ and with clowns. Both of them spent much time walking among the slums and befriending ordinary people whose lives were oppressive. Rouault once wrote about these people who "work without respite unto their death":

> Wounded, they accept suffering courageously, admirably. No fine phrases—They don't talk (they don't know how), they don't write… They are not distinguished and they smell of sweat. They are often ordinary to look at; they are beautiful; they pray… They pray, of course, through their actions.[89]

One of the most important influences on Rouault was the Catholic novelist and social critic Léon Bloy, who wrote at length on religious themes and about the suffering of the common man. Henry Miller was familiar with Bloy's work in the French original.[90] Both Rouault and Bloy were inspired by the same themes as Dostoevsky. Rouault had been likened by Barbey d'Aurevilly to "a cathedral gargoyle spewing rainwater upon the just and the unjust alike." He was immersed in cathedral art. Bloy had intended to write, like Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment* (and Miller in *Tropic of Cancer,* "Mlle. Claude" and *The New Instinctivist Manifesto*), on "the miraculous complicity that exists between the Holy Spirit and that most lamentable, despised, and soiled of human creatures, the prostitute." Miller had, of course, aspired to become "the American Dostoevsky." Rouault painted many prostitutes. It was a theme familiar in Miller's own life and work. It was a preoccupation derived in part from the stories of Christ in the Bible, from Mary Magdalene, Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, Zola's *Nana* and Dostoevsky's Sonia.

Rouault is a painter of transcendental reality. Like Bloy, he was obsessed with the idea of sainthood. Rouault painted several

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satirical sketches, which are known as grotesques. Critics have often compared them to the work of Rabelais, with whom Miller also identified. Rouault himself saw these grotesques as analogous to the gargoyles and figures in cathedral sculpture. Miller would draw exactly the same parallel to his own work—stating that his grotesque characters represented figures on Gothic cathedrals, whereas his more liberated characters could appear as the figures on Hindu temples or Buddhist stupas. Rouault always denied that these grotesques were caricatures and said that they represented a true emotional depiction of the life he saw around him. In 1932, he would return to this style to illustrate Alfred Jarry's *Père Ubu*, a work Miller admired. He also composed a series of paintings entitled *Misère*, which depicted various fundamental themes of human life, such as Labor, War, Death and Maternity. He was, like Miller, an admirer of Baudelaire.

Throughout his career, Rouault painted clowns, Harlequins, Pierrots, buffoons, fools and circus scenes. These figures had arguably the greatest influence on *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, though other aspects of Rouault's work impacted Miller—many of his most moving paintings show moons, including clown paintings such as "Two Pierrots," and others that associate suns and moons with Christ or Christ-like figures. He painted regularly on Biblical themes and also works that were anti-racism and anti-war, as well as equestrian scenes. Rouault's titles for his canvasses are highly evocative and poetic, such as a clown painting entitled "Don't We All Wear Make-up," a study of the working-class district of Belleville entitled "Christ in the Suburbs" or the urban scene "My Sweet Country, Where Art Thou?" One of Rouault's finest paintings is his early work "Head of a Tragic Clown" (1904), which is heartbreaking in its pathos and suffering. His "Three Clowns" (1917) shows us the progression of humanity in three clowns at different stages of life. "Old Clown with White Dog" (1925) shows a clown with his dog, the only being close to him. "The Wounded Clown" (1932) has

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echoes of Christ, supported on each side. In 1926 Rouault had written to André Suarès:

> We are outcasts. My clowns are so many dispossessed kings—their laughter is familiar to me, it comes to unleashing the repressed tears that I feel, and it touches upon bitter resignation.[91]

Suarès had written, in turn, that everything Rouault did was religious and religiously inspired. His art was not only spiritual, but also inspired by musical form and anchored in his reaction to the suffering of everyday life. Rouault once said: "For me, painting is a way to forget life. It is a cry in the night, a strangled laugh." His art was intuitive, like Miller's, as if guided by the "Voice." In the process of composition he could "forget" life while at the same time expressing his religious and moral reaction to it. Miller's identification with Rouault was not only in terms of subject matter. Miller learned from Rouault how to restrain his writing and to create tone poems and limited canvasses from highly charged and violently emotional and spiritual scenes. Rouault was also, like Miller, a rebel against intellectualism in art and against the established canon of his time.

In *Jacob's Night*, Wallace Fowlie had dwelt at length on the revival of the religious spirit that had taken hold in France under Nazi occupation and during the period of a feeling of national shame, which followed the Liberation. He first focused on Charles Péguy (1873-1914), a major intellectual figure in France at that time, about whom Romain Rolland had published a book in 1944. Fowlie spoke of Péguy as a "magician" both in his vision and language and as a symbolic writer. Péguy's work revives the traditional vision of the "eternal France," embodied in characters such as Joan of Arc or scenes such as *la Seine*. It also celebrates the ancient vision of the hero and insists upon the sacredness of the visions of the individual and of justice outside the law. The theme was obviously a central one while

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exiting the period in which the Pétainist government had been representative of the law, but not of justice. Fowlie saw Péguy as a writer trying to unite the temporal with a vision of the eternal. Henry Miller was familiar with Péguy's writings, especially *Men and Saints* and *Eternal Virtues*. His notions of France influenced Miller's essay "Remember to Remember," in which he stated: "that which is French is eternal."

Wallace Fowlie turned to Rouault, whom he identified as "a religious painter" and one who "raises the problem of the religious artist and the problem of the relationship between religion and art in our day." A common thread, Fowlie asserted, united Rouault's art and Bloy's writing:

> The doctrine of redemption through suffering blazes forth from the books and the paintings of these two men. The one who suffers testifies to God, as Bloy says in his sentence: *Vous suffrez. Donc, vous représentez Dieu.*

Rémy de Gourmont (to whose work Miller alludes in *Tropic of Cancer*) had described Bloy as a combination of a religious figure such as Thomas Aquinas and Gargantua from Rabelais. This combination of spiritual being and a radically antisocial figure with a gargantuan appetite is a fine analogy also for the auto-hero "Henry Miller." Fowlie identified Bloy and Rouault as "Christians in revolt against the tepid society in which they see the religious mysteries neglected or misunderstood." Miller was not a Christian, but his criticism of the inhumanity and lack of justice, of the lack of the spiritual and sacred in modern society, paralleled that of Bloy and Rouault. Fowlie explained that in the Christian traditions the whole of existence was seen as a manifestation of the struggle against temptation and sin. The image of the crucifixion haunted people's daily life and every religious act—hence there was no sense of peace or completion. This was the opposite of the ancient Greek or Hindu philosophy.

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Fowlie saw Rouault as an artist in the same tradition that Baudelaire and Rimbaud represented in literature. Fowlie likened these men to Jacob of the Bible who wrestled all night with an angel in order to win his blessing. The blessing was given, but Jacob was maimed by the struggle. Jacob is famously linked to the symbol of the ladder. Fowlie also identified the painted faces of clowns, like images of the crucifixion, with the stigmata of St. Francis. St. Francis was the religious figure in the Christian tradition with whom Miller most closely identified. Fowlie likened *Black Spring* to a modern version of St. Francis' *Canticle to the Sun.*

Wallace Fowlie shared Henry Miller's fascination with "Maldoror," and wrote of this character as the "most tragic caricature" among literary heroes, because of his "pure revolt against God." It was a theme Miller had explored in "Let Us Be Content with Three Little Newborn Elephants." Neither Miller nor Fowlie chose to explore, at this time, an even more tragic figure, which had indirectly given birth to Maldoror—de Sade. Yet, Miller later intended to write a sequel to *The Books in My Life* in which he would have explored the "monsters" of literature and literary legend, such as de Sade and Gilles de Rais, and doubtless Maldoror. Bloy had been the first to recognize the importance of Lautréamont's work.

Georges Rouault emerged from Fowlie's study as "the religious conscience of our age," a modern-day Jacob crippled by his searing visions of the spiritually dead and cruel world that Miller and Michael Fraenkel had so often written about. Fraenkel, Miller and Rouault were all eschatological artists in their unique way. Fraenkel remained locked in the throes of his Death Theme and never formulated a religious reaction to modernity. Miller created a transcendental vision of the future that was deeply indebted to Hinduism and Buddhism. He rejected the Christian notion of Heaven completely. Georges Rouault retained a deep Catholic faith in the medieval, rather than modern, tradition. Each of them was more concerned with life here and now rather than any imaginary heaven. They all saw the problem of salvation in terms of the suffering individual.

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Wallace Fowlie made an important statement when he summed up the nature of Rouault's clown:

> There is nothing pure about him. He is neither pure Saint nor pure Sinner. That is a myth that Rouault repudiates and in its place restores a Christian doctrine so eloquently expounded by Bossuet[92] in the seventeenth century… Rouault, in his paintings… gives the full religious import to the complex psychological drama that inhabits each man. We can be shocked by the abysses and the elevations in ourselves: by the secrets and memories we come upon in daily life. Rouault… teaches that everything is in each man, and in addition the burning desire to save oneself.

Henry Miller imitates this attitude in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, where Auguste becomes a Saint and Sinner, a murderer and a savior. This vision is that of catholicism, in the traditional sense. It is akin to Hindu teaching, which recognizes both the good and evil forces in man and in their Gods. Its mantra is that of acceptance and assimilation. This idea takes us back to the direct teachings of Christ, who manifested a capacity for forgiveness and acceptance and a belief in redemption beyond that of any society or law. At the time Fowlie was writing, the Existentialism of Sartre and Camus was barely known in America. Miller had been one of the first Americans to write about this phenomenon, in his post-War reviews. Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus would in turn support Miller during the trials of the *Cas Miller*. Fowlie saw Rouault as a predecessor of Existentialism. His clowns were, like Miller's, Auguste:

> Mediators… who have appropriated the function of the poet… The particular kind of

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> tragedy, which is so moving in the faces of Rouault's clowns, is summarized more succinctly in a sentence of Kierkegaard than in any other… 'I am no part of a whole, I am not integrated, not included.' The melancholy of Rouault's clown and prostitutes can be explained philosophically by the concept of existence being a feeling of dereliction and estrangement.

It was this feeling of estrangement and yet divine mission that Henry Miller associated with clowns, poets, great *prosateurs* and holy men. It was a form of loneliness and isolation that he felt in his own being. Fowlie noted of Rouault that:

> The clowns are painted in such remarkable harmony with one another and in such harmony with their setting that the separateness of their existence takes on a religious aspect. The moment of Christ's death on the cross, which has often been painted by Rouault, is the deepest of all Existential moments. The moment when God dies to himself and the world... The clown hangs on the world rather than on a cross and there, Rouault paints him dying to it and to himself. The clowns of Rouault are Christ-like because the moment which is to follow the one depicted on the canvas is the chance or possibility of salvation.

This Existential moment was at the heart of Henry Miller's religious message and his portrayal of Auguste. French critics in the late 1940s would sometimes link Miller strongly to Existentialism, a trend that was later enhanced by his interest in the Theatre of the Absurd, his writings on Eugène Ionesco and Miller's own play *Just Wild About Harry*.[93]

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Part 7

By October 1947, Henry Miller was waiting for Merle Armitage to prepare proofs of an edition of *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. He was also busy raising money for Conrad Moricand to sail to America. *Smile* appeared in March 1948 in a run of 5,000 copies in a beautiful edition, illustrated by André de Segonzac, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, Georges Rouault, and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. Miller was rendered "speechless" by the superb production. The published correspondence between Miller and Fowlie was selectively edited for publication, probably in part to shield from the public comments about Miller's disastrous encounter with Conrad Moricand in early 1948 and Henry's severe marital difficulties. Moricand departed Big Sur in March 1948, after only three months. The discussions between Miller and Fowlie became less personal as time went on and as Miller became more engaged in family life and in finishing *The Rosy Crucifixion*. With the eventual break-up of his marriage to Lepska, Miller may even have felt the need to gain distance from Fowlie, whom he associated with meeting her. They continued, however, to correspond sporadically until Miller's death.[94]

Wallace Fowlie was one of the first American critics to recognize Henry Miller's debt to the Symbolist mode of thought and the fact that he was writing in a French tradition that also encompassed such figures as de Sade, Rimbaud and Rabelais. What Fowlie saw in the 1940s was perceptive for America, but not unusual in France where, through the 1940s and 1950s,

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Miller was often referred to as a religious writer and as closely linked to figures such as Rabelais, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Céline and Balzac. The preface to the first French edition of *Tropic of Cancer* (by Henri Fluchère in 1945), for example, had spoken of Miller's work in connection with the divine and with music. Other American critics had preempted Fowlie—*The New Yorker* (on December 27th 1941) had already labeled Miller as a mystic. George Barker, in *The Nation* (January 3rd 1942), wrote of Miller's books as "religious confessions."

Wallace Fowlie provided a major impetus behind the composition of *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. He did this by dint of his own obsessions with symbolic clowns in both French literature and art and by constantly drawing Miller back to these ideas and representations. Fowlie also forced Miller to reflect on clown symbolism and to return to many of the artistic depictions of clowns and circuses he had long admired. Fowlie became Miller's confidant and intellectual companion on religious themes and on French literature at a time when the liberation of Paris, commercial success in Paris, and renewed contact with old friends, had brought France back to the center-stage in Miller's thoughts. Miller and Fowlie had been discussing French literature and art and religion for three years before the composition of *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. Fowlie presented a paradox to Miller that subconsciously he felt he needed to resolve. Wallace Fowlie was a Catholic convert. Miller detested the Catholic Church, yet often loved the way Fowlie thought and shared many of his opinions. What Miller needed emotionally was reconciliation between his "catholic" vision of the world and Fowlie's "Catholicism." This he would achieve in part through the symbolic ballet of *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, which incorporates iconography that is derived from Catholicism, Hinduism and Buddhism. It aims to present a universal vision of Reality, enlightenment and religious experience. *Smile* is a prelude to a more developed, though far less controlled, meditation on this theme in *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*.

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Henry Miller saw strong parallels between the true original teachings of Christ and mediaeval Catholicism and Buddhism and Hinduism. He also saw the established Christian churches, particularly the modern Catholic and American Calvinists, as perversions of Christ's message. The purity of Christ's teaching and the Saints had been preserved in the works of Rouault and certain Christian mystics (St. Francis, Meister Eckhart, Swedenborg), but also in the allegedly "evil" or "*voyou*" aspects of French literature. This was visible in writers like Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Baudelaire and Rabelais. Like Christ, these writers did not turn from evil but rather embraced it and conquered it by assimilation—by the force of love, tenderness and compassion, or by confronting God and asserting the sacredness of their own being. Their anti-social and anarchic behavior was an expression of outrage at the inhumanity and brutality, the hypocrisy and sadism of society and the Church. It was also a result of their struggle to clarify a sacred vision. They made both evil and everyday life a source of creation. In this transmutation, their reaction to evil was a holy and sacred one—they recognized the sacred body and the divine within all creation. This is the explanation as to why these writers are often seen in France as religious figures and prophets, as in Jean-Paul Sartre's depiction of "Saint Genet" or Joseph Delteil's vision of *Saint* Don Juan.

Henry Miller's personal quest was for Apocatastasis. He spoke of this theme in *The Colossus of Maroussi* and *The Time of the Assassins* and elsewhere, though it was implicit in all his work, beginning with some of the *Mezzotints,* and *Moloch*. Wallace Fowlie's emotional and creative search was similar, although he saw it in terms of a Catholic God, while Miller saw it simply in terms of God, free from doctrine and religious definitions, accessible to anyone of any faith at any time. These two men became so close and inspired each other so much because their desired end-point and intellectual background was so parallel. Their differences were *au fond*, essentially ones of semantics,

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rooted in their understanding of the word "God." Fowlie initially fulfilled an important role for Miller at time when he was both lonely and disoriented. As the focus of Miller's life turned to his children, revisiting his past life in *The Rosy Crucifixion* and new friends in Big Sur, such as Emil White, Fowlie's importance diminished.

Wallace Fowlie wrote various short accounts of his critical response to Henry Miller's writing. His reaction was predictable, given Fowlie's deep immersion in Symbolism and Surrealism's ancestors. One is immediately struck by the fact that what attracted Fowlie most to Miller was the violence of his language and his links to Surrealist automatic writing. Fowlie saw "The Angel is My Watermark" and *Smile* as expositions on the Surrealist manner of composition. He told Miller that he wanted to focus, in writing about *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, on the Surrealist element of composition. Henry Miller remained silent, but was aware that Fowlie was behaving in the way that most critics and scholars did—they interpreted everything in the light of their pet themes and theories. Miller had composed *Smile* largely (though not exclusively) in the Surrealist-automatic manner, but had made it clear that this was hardly the main point of the book. Paradoxically, it was Fowlie's Catholic faith that prevented him from understanding or admitting the full import of Miller's catholic vision. There were French Surrealist influences on *Smile*, but also more allegiances to Buddhism, Hinduism, music and art that Fowlie ignored.

Henry Miller's correspondence with Wallace Fowlie was written in a very specific mode. At times, it gives a distorted view of Miller's life. Comparing it with the correspondence from the 1940s with Lawrence Durrell, one sees that Miller was often troubled, harried and unhappy—something that usually does not come through when Miller writes to Fowlie, to whom he wished to appear spiritual, calm and confident. On March 14th 1949, Miller informed Durrell, knowing his familiarity with Hinduism, that:

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> I want to see established the 'artist of life.' The Christ resurrected would be such, for example. Milarepa was another… This ties up with the progression… from Bergson-Spengler to Chinese-Hindus. I think I've passed that too now. The key word is Reality… it comes back to reality here and now, nothing else… emphasis is on vision… the world *is* and is good, right, perfect. The vulgar think this self-hypnosis. It's not. It's Samadhi all the time. It's God everywhere and nothing but. Or Spirit, if you prefer. But no duality. Whatever is negative, vicious, evil etc. is due to poor vision, poor understanding. You don't seek immortality because you are in the midst of eternity… You are not concerned with good and bad, moralities, because you don't set up as judge.[95]

Henry Miller's choice of the term *Samadhi* reveals his vision is truly Hindu. Samadhi is a state of pure being, pure joy and bliss and of no-ego and no-mind. It is the only true unchanging Reality. It creates the bridge (or ladder) to union with the Ocean of Divine Love (Heaven/the Godhead). It is the state Auguste reaches at the end of *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*.

When the letters between Henry Miller and Wallace Fowlie were published in 1975, Fowlie added an essay entitled "Henry Miller and French Writers." Fowlie changed his views on Miller's writing over the years. At first, he had thought Miller was only indebted to the picaresque tradition of the "lusty lover of life." He thus saw him as linked to Rabelais and Réstif de la Bretonne. He saw Miller's closeness to Jean Giono arising because "among the moderns Jean Giono comes closest to Rabelais." Miller's debt to Blaise Cendrars was evident, as was his love of Balzac's mystical works. Fowlie expanded his brief analysis to encompass Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Baudelaire and Proust. However, he neglected, throughout all his writing on Miller, many French

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writers who impacted Henry Miller and who, at different points in his life, were seminal influences. These include: André Breton, Jean Bruller, Georges Duhamel, Élie Faure, Joseph Delteil, Guillaume Apollinaire, Henri Bergson, Francis Carco, Jean Cocteau, Léon-Paul Fargue, Jean-Henri Fabre, Anatole France, André Gide, Joris Karl Huysmans, Pierre Loti, Maurice Maeterlinck, Molière, Montaigne, Paul Morand, Conrad Moricand, Gérard de Nerval, Romain Rolland, Tristan Tzara, Paul Valéry, Paul Verlaine, François Villon and Émil Zola.

Wallace Fowlie never produced an extensive study of Henry Miller's work. He did, however, play a unique role in the genesis of one of Miller's least known books. More than any other text Henry Miller wrote, *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* gives us a concise and allegorical vision of the point towards which all his writing was aimed—Apocatastasis and the attainment of Samadhi. The intent of all Henry Miller's work was the elimination of the duality and schizophrenia he felt within himself and in society. He attempted to project a vision of the unity of the human and divine, man and nature, and of art and life, right here on earth. He sought enlightenment and joy, the achievement of harmony from discord, and an end to both judgment and conflict. He saw this end-condition as the attainment of a state of grace. *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* was not the start of a new trend or direction in Henry Miller's writing. It did, however, provide the spiritual ladder or bridge between *The Colossus of Maroussi* and *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* and between *Sexus* and the more compassionate and enlightened vision of *Plexus* and beyond. Those who could climb and descend the ladder he imagined were "Clowns" and "Angels" or "Fools and Simpletons," like him.

Henry Miller's musical vision was gradually transformed by his discovery of himself as an artist and a man. From the jagged "dance of death" of *Tropic of Cancer*, he explored new atonal modern musical visions in *Black Spring,* only to pass though to the symphonic form of *The Colossus of Maroussi* and the balletic

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form of *Smile*, in which movement and form achieved harmony. *The Rosy Crucifixion* stood in the background like a great, unfinished, quartet.[96] The notion of a "smile" had been a highly symbolic metaphor for Henry Miller for decades. In *Black Spring*, he had contrasted the toothy, fake, smile of brash America with the harmonious and unthreatening smile of the true enlightenment, of the Buddha. In 1933 he wrote that when he thought about an American smile it was the "cruel white smile" that stuck in his memory. It is a George C. Tilyou smile.[97] It was "America smiling at poverty… Smile and the world is yours. Smile through the death rattle… Smile damn you! *The smile that never comes off*."[98]

Like the great French writers he admired, and like Rouault and Dostoevsky, Henry Miller's identification with others could be extreme. At times, he had said in *Black Spring*, he felt that if he took another step "the pain of his love will kill him." One, he said, "walks around in a circular cage on shifting levels" reminiscent of a circus ring or the Purgatory of Dante. If one truly knows love, compassion and charity, then one weeps the tears of the Auguste clowns that would obsess Miller all his life, and about which he wrote in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. Weep as one might, Henry Miller came, during the mid-1940s, to the realization that all men must save themselves. The clowns and fools, angels and teachers, might give them relief or offer potential temporary solutions. The only true answer was an affirmation of life and of oneself, an acceptance of the good and the evil in each of us, which were the two faces of every man, of life on earth, *and God*. The most inspiring men would always be those who:

> Exhorted man to realize that he had all the freedom in himself, that he was not to concern himself with the fate of the world (which is not his problem) but to solve his own individual problem, which is a question of liberation and nothing else. (*The Books in my Life*)

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That was the reason that Auguste, the clown, was able to smile in the face of death—because, like Miller, he had realized "there was no death, nor were there any judges or executioners save in our own imagining." Henry Miller knew, for sure, that "no amount of seeking will bring you closer to God. God is within you." He told us to "not put the Buddha or Christ beyond or outside yourself. Recognize him in yourself." If we could do this, then we, like Auguste, would have every reason to smile.

FINIS

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Endnotes

1. Reprinted in America by Greenwood Press (1955) and New Directions (1958) and in London by McGibbon & Kee (1966). It has been translated into several languages, including French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Danish, Russian and Japanese. The title contains hidden allusions to the *Memoirs* of Victor Hugo in which he stands at the foot of the ladder to watch the procession to the guillotine at the end of the old order, and to Dante's *Paradiso*. A diametric opposite to Miller's interpretation of symbols is given by Johnny Cash's song "In Your Mind" from *Dead Man Walking*. The Miller book is rarely, but occasionally, taught, as at DePauw University (2004).

Another image that may have influenced Miller's *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* is William Blake's "Jacob's Ladder." Miller saw Chagall's painting "The Dream of Jacob" in Paris in the 1930s. It was an important influence on *Smile*. Chagall would return to similar images repeatedly.

2. While *Playboy* was publishing some of Miller's writing in the early 1970s, a new edition of *Smile* even appeared from feel-good publishers Hallmark. Reviews of *Smile* first appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (June 28th 1948), *The New York Times* (June 6th 1948), *Time* (June 28th 1948), *Kirkus* (June 1st 1948) and *Tiger's Eye* (October 20th 1948). A later review is found in *The Lost Generation Journal* (winter 1976-77).

3. Louise Miller took Henry as a child to the venue that started his life-long obsession with the circus—Ulmer Park. Here the European circuses would visit, and Henry saw his very first clowns. At Ulmer Park, Henry first saw the "Auguste" clowns with whom he identified—melancholy men who feigned humor and fun while at heart being

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lonely and anonymous, like Henry, trapped behind a painted smile.

4. Climacus' ladder has 30 rungs or steps that lead to religious perfection and unity with God. See Fr. John Mack *Ascending the Heights: A Layman's Guide to the Ladder of Divine Ascent* ISBN 1-888212-17-9. This ladder imagery is particularly important in Russia and in Orthodox Christianity. Miller knew of several instances in Russian literature and art.

5. Another important ladder with religious connotations is the Immovable Ladder of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

6. This is discussed by Karl Orend in *The Brotherhood of Fools & Simpletons* (Alyscamps Press 2005).

7. Miller reiterates here the idea he often stated that he and his person, his work and message are one and inseparable, just like the performance of a clown or the life of a holy man.

8. Miller's comments remind one of several iconic images of clowns in popular culture, such as Max Wall.

9. In *The World of Sex* Miller wrote:

> In *Tropic of Capricorn* the use of the obscene is more studied and deliberate, perhaps because of a heightened awareness of the exacting demands of the medium. The Interlude called 'The Land of Fuck' is for me a high-water mark in the fusion of symbol, myth and metaphor. Employed as a breakwater, it serves a double purpose. (Just as the clown acts in the circus not only relieve the tension, but also prepares one for still greater tension.)

10. A writer Miller admired, Huysmans, in *L'Art moderne*, declared the circus to be "the masterpiece of a new architecture…"

11. For a discussion of Miller's relations to Balzac and his *Séraphita* see the reference in note 6. Miller's essays on Balzac appear in *The Wisdom of the Heart*.

12. Bibalo (born 1922 in Italy) has lived in Norway since 1957. He is a Norwegian citizen and Norway's greatest opera composer. His international reputation was founded with his version of Miller's *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. Bibalo's 2-Act opera (written and revised

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with alternate texts 1958-62) was first performed with great success at the Staatsoper Hamburg in April 1965. Miró designed the décor.

The *Henry Miller Newsletter* contained the following contemporary account:

> "In a letter of February 19th 1963 Antonio Bibalo reported to us the completion of his opera based on Henry Miller's *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder:*
>
> 'Many things have happened to me since I last wrote you,' his letter states. 'And moreover there has been the last heavy stretch that brought my opera to completion. Thank God it has arrived safely in port. This after more than three years of concentrated work, which cut me off completely from the outside world.'
>
> 'The work on the opera ended a month ago. As you know, Wilhelm Hansens, music publisher of Copenhagen, is publishing it. Friedrich Görtler has translated the Italian text into German. The piano vocal score is in the hands of Hans Holewa. The premier is to be towards the end of January 1964 in the State Opera House of Hamburg, with Dr. Oktar Fritz Schue as producer. That is all there is to say officially for the moment.
>
> I found it extremely difficult to put into opera form the material in such a simple and short book as *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. Maybe it would be easier to turn the book into a movie or TV play—I don't know. But for the purposes of lyric drama lasting two hours, it has been a most challenging task. Imagine the thousand problems that have arisen constantly… the musical stresses, matters of continuity and of dynamic expression. I am sometimes bewildered at the realization that the end of the trail has been reached. Work was interrupted several times by illness and other personal calamities. In short, it is my life's chimera. While I would not dare compare my work with Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus, I do believe I have gone through much of the fatigue and deep anguish Mann experienced in its writing.'"

The opera parts are assigned as follows:

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- Auguste—Bass
- Guido—Tenor
- Anni I—Soprano
- The Ringmaster—Bass-baritone
- Auguste II—Dancer (non singing)
- Anni II and III—Mezzo-soprano
- Lion tamer, Magician, Clown, Horses and Tigers, Dancers.

The International Association of Libraries and Museums of the Performing Arts reported, at its conference in 1985, that there were great difficulties tracing the history of versions of Bibalo's opera (which has been performed over 70 times internationally). Dr. Thomas Siedhoff wrote in the Proceedings:

> When, during the final editing of the first volume of the *Encyclopedia of Musical Theatre*, we tried to get information about the different versions of the finale of the opera *The Smile At the Foot of the Ladder* by Antonio Bibalo, we met with general helplessness—even from those who should have been most familiar with the altered appearance of the work. The publishers did not know anything about different versions of this work, which didn't have its first performance until April 1965 at the Hamburgische Staatsoper. Neither did the producer, Kurt Horres, have any records about the alterations made by himself later for his productions in Darmstadt and Munich with the consent of the composer. The composer did not have materials either, but informed us that he would authorize either version to be performed. Only further inquiry at one of the theatres where Horres had staged the work with his alterations, after a lengthy correspondence, helped us to obtain material that enabled us to describe the parts differing from the printed score by means of a still faulty, internal video recording.

13. The book has also been made into a theater piece, which is popular in the French translation of Georges Belmont. Théâtre De

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Grütli (Geneva) performed it in Switzerland in 2003 directed by Armand Abplanalp, with music by Daniel Bourquin.

In April 1998, another version was performed in Paris at Théâtre de Tourtour by the Pierre à Feu Company.

A radical French company called Cirque has performed their adaptation at various venues including the Salzburg Winterfest (2003) and at the Terschellings Oerol Festival in Holland (2004). Their version, which continues to tour Europe, appeared at the Copenhagen International Theatre in Denmark in June 2004 with Ueli Hirzel and Mads Rosenbeck and in Romania in December 2005. It was performed in Reykjavik, Iceland in 2006 and forms a centerpiece of their international repertoire.

WUK Theater (Vienna) performed a German play version in 2002.

Michelle Elmore (2001) produced a series of photographs exhibited at the New Orleans Contemporary Arts Center based on *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*.

English play versions have been performed at various venues, such as San Francisco State University (1993).

A spoken word recording by Miller was released in 1962 (E8 Shifreen & Jackson).

In August 2005, in Austin, Texas (at the Hideout on South Congress) there were various performances of *La Putain avec des Fleurs* by Rocky Hopson. This is a play based on *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* and also on one of Miller's favorite books, Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*. First performed at the Orlando Fringe Festival in 2002, it won several awards there.

Hopson told the *Austin Chronicle*:

> A friend of mine gave me Miller's book and said, 'Read this. I think it would make a good play.' So I read it and it reminded me of *Siddhartha*, so I reread that and started thinking about this French clown and his search for the spirit. He keeps having these weird visions while he's doing his show because his mind keeps wandering. Still, people love him more and more, even though he's not really with them. I started thinking about telling it theatrically,

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vaudeville, and cabaret kind of thing. It's hard to categorize it because I'm using this old type of melodrama style. It's very upbeat, and there's lots of music, but it's not a musical, in the way that a song progresses the story. The songs comment on the plot but don't advance it.

In November 2003, a teacher and writer named Trisha Brown gave this account of a production of *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (Bibalo opera version) at the French National Opéra Bastille in Paris. This is the most important operatic venue in France:

> I dashed to the Opéra Bastille to see a production of Henry Miller's "Le Sourire au pied de l'échelle" which translates literally as "the Smile at the Foot of the Ladder." Who knew that Henry Miller wrote a play for children? It was billed as for 11-year olds and up. Wouldn't you know it; this was very sophisticated theater for kids! The main character is a clown, so there are wonderful acrobatics and foolery in the circus scenes. The theme is about private and public personae, dreams and coming into focus with oneself. A very large "audience" of child and adult singers wonderfully costumed in black and white both animatedly loves and rejects the clown. The music was created for the production and extremely playful and loose but with recognizable circus themes. Most astonishing was the audience response at the end. The bows were as fancy as anything was in the piece, giving the audience a long sequence in which to appreciate all the performers. And when the bows were done, everyone just kept clapping in rhythm. For a long, long time, saying to me: this is new, this is adventurous and well done.

14. Miller does not mention Modigliani, who also drew and painted circus scenes. Modigliani would depict himself as the famous clown, Pierrot. Modi was a friend of Max Jacob (whom he painted) and of Moricand (who made his death mask). Alexander Calder, whom Miller saw upon his arrival in Paris in 1930, would also create a sculpture installation called "Circus." Miller's friend Raymond Queneau published a novel, using the clown image, entitled *Pierrot mon ami* in 1942.

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15. One of Schoenberg's great works is the atonal *Pierrot lunaire* (1924, Pierrot the moonstruck clown), with its obvious references to clowns and the moon. Miller was aware of this piece. It is an expressionistic work that subverts continuity and traditional tonal form in a similar way to Miller's *Black Spring*. This music impacted Hans Reichel and Paul Klee. Schoenberg asserts, like Miller, the role of the clown as intermediary between the human and the divine. The composition attempts to assimilate the opposite poles of human experience and presents the clown figure as both fool and hero. Schoenberg had other parallels to Miller in his ideas and influences. Both men were, for example, influenced by the story of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in the Maeterlinck and Debussy versions.

16. For a lengthy discussion of this topic see the reference in note 6.

17. Sinnett began his work in a book entitled *The Occult World*, which anticipated *Esoteric Buddhism*.

18. James M. Decker, *Henry Miller and Narrative Form: Constructing the Self, Rejecting Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

19. Miller to Cairns, SIU Special Collections, un-catalogued.

20. For background consult Geoffrey Barborka *H. P. Blavatsky, Tibet and Tulku* (Theosophical Publishing House, Madras 1966) and H. P. Blavatsky *In the Caves and Jungles of Hindustan* (Theosophical Publishing Society of London 1892).

21. Blavatsky would write an article on the number seven in *The Theosophist* of June 1880 in which she stated:

> The number *seven* was considered sacred not only by all the cultured nations of antiquity and the East, but was held in the greatest reverence even by the later nations of the West. The astronomical origin of this number is established beyond any doubt. Man, feeling himself time out of mind dependent upon the heavenly powers, ever and everywhere made earth subject to heaven. The largest and brightest of the luminaries thus became in his sight the most important and highest of powers. Such were the planets, which the whole of antiquity numbered as *seven*. In the course of time these were transformed into *seven* deities. The Egyptians had *seven* original and higher gods; the

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> Phoenicians *seven* kabiris; the Persians, *seven* sacred horses of Mithra; the Parsees, *seven* angels opposed by *seven* demons and *seven* celestial abodes paralleled by *seven* lower regions. To represent more clearly this idea in its concrete form, the *seven gods* were often represented as one *seven-headed* deity. The whole heaven was subjected to the *seven* planets; hence, in nearly all the religious systems we find *seven* heavens.

22. Miller became a writer 1924, changed direction in 1931 with *Tropic of Cancer*, achieved higher level of consciousness and work in 1938 with *Tropic of Capricorn* and so on. Sinnett states that "in periods of sevens the evolution of the races man may be traced and the actual number of the objective worlds which constitute our world is also seven… There are seven kingdoms of nature."

23. This idea is echoed in the Gnostic Column of Glory.

24. *Esoteric Buddhism* pp.44-46.

25. *Idem* p.73.

26. *Idem* p.75.

27. Miller is unclear about how or when he discovered the practical application of spirals to the historical process of culture and civilization. Petrie anticipated Spengler's ideas in *The Revolutions of Civilization* (Harper and Brothers 1911). Miller admits to reading the book. Petrie was a world-famous historian and archaeologist at the time. Miller states that he read Faure in translation as the volumes first appeared. He elsewhere gives the impression that he learned of Spengler from Hans von Stengel circa 1926. It is probable that Miller discovered Faure, Proust and Spengler for the first time in a book by one of his favorite writers, Havelock Ellis, in 1923. This was *The Dance of Life*, which contained detailed discussions of Petrie, Spengler, Faure, Proust, Nietzsche and other of Miller's main influences. In 1923 such discussions were radically new. Most of Proust, Faure and Spengler's writings were un-translated at that time. Petrie had been anticipated by Nietzsche and by other historians such as Brooks Adams in *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (Macmillan 1896).

28. Miller's probable first discovery of Buddhism and Hinduism

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through its seminal texts was at circa age 18 when he inherited a complete set of the volumes of the "Harvard Classics Five-Foot Shelf of Books." Here he had a comprehensive introduction to world history, religion, philosophy and literature, including the Gita, Confucius, and Lao Tse. It also contained detailed texts on Buddhism and Hinduism.

29. The best introduction to this remains Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Bollingen 1954). See also Donald Carr *The Eternal Return* (Doubleday 1968). The impact of Hindu and Buddhist thought on Transcendentalism, on Whitman, Bucke, Thoreau and Emerson is overwhelming. It is traced in a mass of books. Selected titles include: Arthur Christy *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* (Columbia 1932), Thomas Tweed *The American Encounter with Buddhism* (Indiana 1992), Rick Fields *How the Swans Came to the Lake* (Shambala 1992) and Umesh Patri *Hindu Scriptures and American Transcendentalists* (Intellectual Publishing, Delhi 1987).

30. Hans von Bülow wrote "in the beginning was rhythm." This links rhythm to the *logos* and God. For a discussion of the importance of Rhythm in life, religion and philosophy see Elsie Fogarty *Rhythm* (Allen and Unwin 1937). Rhythm is essential to life because it represents the unity of time, space and force. It is no accident that the happy and enlightened man is seen *in harmony with* the world and himself. Rhythm, music and dance were common metaphors for the universe and its interactions in Miller's time. We find it for example in Bergson, in Proust and Einstein. Proust's novels form a series of cycles or spirals in which he aims to eliminate time. He was in the direct line of Dante and Balzac, both of whom inspired him. Triptych and spirals, cathedral architecture comes together in his work and Miller's and Dante's. Music and architecture, and writers on these, such as Ruskin, were a major influence on both Miller and Proust. Georges Cattaui, in *Marcel Proust* (Merlin 1967) describes Proust's work as "the ascesis of an Oriental sage." The Flemish masters also influenced Proust. It should be recalled that cathedral architecture (found echoed in Miller and Proust) has been compared to nature, to a forest. As an example of how astrological lore can enter into cathedral architecture see Fred Gettings *The Secret Zodiac* (Routledge 1987). One thing that immediately strikes readers is the similarity between the yin/yang symbol of Buddhism and the roundel of Pisces, the two fishes joined by the *Nodus Coelestis*. One imitates Christ by traversing the Cancer-Capricorn axis of the Zodiac.

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Miller did this symbolically in his books.

31. See O. K. Nambiar, *Maha Yogi Walt Whitman* (Jeevan, Bangalore 1978) and V. Sachithanandan, *Whitman and Bharati* (Macmillan 1978).

32. A. C. Bhattacharya, *Sri Aurobindo and Bergson—A Synthetic Study* (Jagababdhu Bhavan 1972).

33. See Bruno Petzold, *Goethe und der Mahahana Buddhismus* (Octopus Verlag, Wien 1936) and Robert Morrison, *Nietzsche and Buddhism* (O.U.P. 1997), G. J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson* (Ohio U.P. 1992) and M.S. Green, *Nietzsche and the Transcendental Tradition* (Illinois U.P. 2002).

34. Important studies which throw light on Miller's time obsession within a Transcendental context include James Guthrie, *Above Time—Emerson's and Thoreau's Temporal Revolutions* (Missouri U.P. 2001) and Dan Shaw Jackson, *Emerson and Nietzsche—Their Ideas on History* (unpublished thesis Texas A & M 1951). For Miller, see Ihab Hassan *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (Knopf 1968). The crucial role of Bergson's *Creative Evolution* in Miller's intellectual make-up should be emphasized. Other major influences on Miller such as Hamsun, Cendrars and Keyserling had a knowledge of and affinity with the Hindu and Buddhist tradition.

35. Miller to Cairns April 30th 1939 *op.cit.* See D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (reprinted Bollingen 1959). The parallels between art forms freed from Christian morality, such as the writings of Miller, and the Oriental tradition are briefly explored by Katrin Burtschell in her essay on Miller and Araki in *Nexus*: *The International Henry Miller Journal* volume 3. Further parallels between the sexual content of Miller's writing and Chinese and Hindu tradition can be drawn by consulting John Byron, *Portrait of a Chinese Paradise* (Quartet 1987) and Mulk Raj Anand, *The Hindu View of Art* (Allen and Unwin 1933).

36. Miller & Durrell, *A Private Correspondence op cit.* p.150ff. In April 1939, Miller wrote to Durrell that he had been reading articles on Tibetan Buddhism by Bernard Bromage. It was here that Miller grew to love Milarepa. Miller wrote, "Zen is my idea of life absolutely, the closest thing to what I am unable to formulate in words. I am a Zen addict through and through… No intelligent person can help but be a

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Buddhist. It is clear as a bell to me… All these modern mystikers… are stinking caricatures of this doctrine." He later wrote: "the nearest philosophy to my heart and temperament is Zen… I find individuals here and there, all over the world, who belong to no cult or creed or metaphysic, who are expressing what I mean… it always comes back to Reality, here and now, nothing else, nothing before or beyond." Durrell became immersed in Suzuki in 1955 and thus, via their letters, threw this influence back onto center stage while Miller was writing *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*.

37. George Orwell, for instance, missed this Zen trait when he wrote, in his "Inside the Whale," that Miller revealed a "passive attitude," which linked him to the "ordinary man."

38. For an interesting discussion of these topics see Günther Grass & Kenzaburô Oe *Fifty Years Ago Today* (Alyscamps Press 2000).

39. Essays on the *Cas Miller* by this author were published in volume 3 of *Nexus*: *The International Henry Miller Journal*.

40. Circus is thus linked to theatre; one of Miller's loves. The upper reaches of the theatre are known as "the Gods." In Miller's day they were often called "Nigger Heaven" or "Paradise."

41. There are several types of clown in circus. They have different forms of make-up and behave in a different manner. The type know as the Auguste Clown, on which Miller's character is based, is portrayed as the least intelligent but the most zany and slapstick. His face is given flesh tones; he wears a small hat, partially bald head and oversized tie and lapels. One of the most famous Auguste clowns was Lou Jacobs, whose namesake is familiar to all Miller's readers of *The Books in My Life*. Miller had seen famous Auguste clowns in previous years, including Lou Jacobs and Albert Fratellini. Fratellini performed often at the Medrano, where Miller saw him. Jacobs performed in vaudeville in Manhattan in the late 1920s. Legend has it that a performer called Tom Belling, while on tour in Germany, invented the format of Auguste clowning. He had been reprimanded by his boss and, as a result, put on exaggerated clothes (small hat, jacket with wide lapels) to try to ingratiate himself and make his boss laugh. Running into the ring he fell over the curbing and the audience yelled out "Auguste!" which is German for fool. Chaplin is often likened to

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an Auguste clown. Max Wall, famous interpreter of Beckett, is another familiar Auguste clown. These figures are linked to the Everyman of morality plays.

42. Miller's tendency towards the end of language shows his parallel with Beckett but also Beckett's master James Joyce (in *Finnegans Wake*). Miller often railed against Joyce (who also referred to himself as a clown). Yet Joyce ironically represented, for the intellectual man and the élite, the same kind of vision of the endpoint of the tyranny of knowledge and language that Miller believed he offered to the everyday man who had no book or college learning. Both Miller and Joyce set themselves up as God-like creators who manipulated the Word. Joyce was the spokesman and idol of the scholarly academic, Miller of those who had not undergone formal education but aspired to have a voice.

43. "Sunday at the Grand Jatte" (1864) is one of Seurat's finest works. It single-handedly laid the foundations of Neo-Impressionism. This painting is famous for its focus on internal harmonies and its intimations of timelessness. Its construction suggests both musical form and ballet. Seurat died at the age of 31.

44. Jacob underwent a famous religious conversion. He has been called "the clown at the altar."

45. Reprinted in Henry Miller *Letter from Dijon*, edited by Karl Orend (Jackson Publishing 2005). Publication details for all books prior to 1993 can be found in the standard Jackson-Shifreen-Ashley *Henry Miller: A Bibliography of Primary Sources* (Alyscamps/Jackson 1993). Miller regularly attended the Medrano and the Cirque d'Hiver in Paris. He said that he thought the Medrano would probably remain unchanged for at least a hundred years. Others thought differently. One of the most beautiful buildings in Paris, it was demolished in 1973.

46. For a detailed discussion of the artist as clown see Jean Gerard & Clair Regnier, *The Great Parade: The Artist as Clown* (Yale 2004), to which I am indebted.

47. I saw a pitiful, old, *saltimbanque*, stooped, worn-out, a human ruin, leaning back against one of the posts of his shack…But what an intense and unforgettable gaze

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> he cast over the crowd and lights… I said to myself: I have just seen the very image of the old writer who has outlived his generation, which he brilliantly amused, or of the old friendless poet… whose booth the forgetful world no longer wishes to enter.
>
> —Charles Baudelaire.

48. Ineffable—too sacred to be spoken of by name—as with the personal name of G-d in the Old Testament.

49. This scene is mainly derived from Miró's painting "Dog Barking at the Moon" (1926). It also alludes to Chagall's "The Dream of Jacob" (1930-32). Confusion is caused here because Chagall painted another canvas with a similar title "Jacob's Dream" in 1954. The Moon also represents Miller's visual memory of the spotlight in the circus. The Moon is a symbol associated with epiphanies and cosmic events as well as the feminine principle and Buddhist enlightenment. It is also the symbol of the intuitive. The Buddhist image of a moon reflected in water is the image of the ideal state of no-mind. Christ is identified with water and with tears. The Christ-like figure of the clown is seen as aspiring to rejoin the moon, a symbol of the bride of Christ. This would create the union of opposites necessary for perfection and harmony: male/female, sun/moon or human/divine.

Miller identifies with the dog image in *Nexus*, in which he is barking at the sky because of June, his symbol of the moon/the eternal feminine. This is also an allusion to Pierre Vidal.

This moon image links to contemporary art via Jackson Pollock's "The Moon Woman" (1942). It reminds of Baudelaire's poem "The Favors of the Moon." Miller was immersed in moon imagery from his readings of Symbolist poetry. Rimbaud once said: "Every Moon is atrocious."

50. The ascension is based on the story of the vision of Jacob from the Book of Genesis:

> And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep.
>
> And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold

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the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father and the God of Issac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it.

And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread across to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again to this land; for I will not leave thee…

In The Midrash we have an explanation for Jacob's vision. He is a holy man. Angels thus constantly accompany him. The ladder is a symbol of the link between the human and the divine, between paradise and earth, between illusion and perfect enlightenment. It is important to Miller that God chose Jacob as the father of Israel. Jacob was both a liar and a thief who had misled his dying father and stolen his brother's birthright. He is thus a perfect symbol of redemption by election. He is chosen for what he is, not judged for what he has done. Thus Miller identified both with his transgression and salvation. It is interesting that in these ascension images in the Bible we usually hear of angels first ascending and then descending rather than vice versa. This asserts that they are amongst us.

Christ would return to the ladder imagery in John 1:51:

Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

The ladder is linked to images of Christ's passion. Ladders were traditionally often depicted in paintings as abutting the cross on which Christ was crucified. Cicero spoke of life's journey as a ladder. St. Augustine spoke of the ladder as the Catholic Church. It is the means by which we ascend to unity with the Godhead:

Christ is the ladder reaching from earth to heaven, or from the carnal to the spiritual. By His assistance the carnal

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ascend to spirituality; and the spiritual may be said to descend to nourish the carnal with milk when they cannot speak to them as to spiritual, but as to carnal. There is thus both an ascent and a descent upon the Son of Man.

We ascend to Him to see Him in heavenly places; we descend to Him for the nourishment of His weak members. And the ascent and descent are by Him as well as to Him. Following His example, those who preach Him not only rise to behold Him exalted, but let themselves down to give a plain announcement of the truth.

—St. Augustine,
On the Morals of the Catholic Church.

The ladder imagery is also familiar among many texts of other religions, notably *The Koran*, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and Chinese and Japanese Buddhist texts. It was also a fundamental symbol of alchemy and of the steps to perfection. It appeared in several works of modern art, such as Picasso's famous 1934 Crucifixion sketch, rediscovered in 1996. This long neglected work by Picasso also contains allusions to theatre and circus. In 1932, Jung had identified Picasso as a schizophrenic. Miller would (like Nin) identify himself as schizophrenic. He wrote in *The World of Lawrence* that schizoid types were the norm among artists of his age. The clown is a symbol of schizophrenia. The duel-faced god Janus similarly unites the sun and moon.

51. This is initiation into the divine mysteries. Martyrdom is understood as dying as a testament of faith. It is usually a prelude to sanctity and to Christian identification with Christ and the Saints.

52. This anticipates references to the circles of Dante's Purgatory and Hell, which recur later in *Smile* (Miller was also remembering Brassaï's famous photograph of the Medrano, reproduced in this volume). These souls are able to witness the mystery of unification but not participate in it. Captivated by the vision of paradise they will be propelled back into suffering. Their inability to participate is part of their torment. What Dante labeled circles are in fact spirals.

53. Miller uses the Hindu symbol of spirals of bliss here. This links back to his obsession with spirals and Spiral Form discussed in the

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footnotes above and in the reference in note 6. It is the symbol of Kali and of the eternal destruction and creation of the universe. Spirals appear in simplified form as Swastikas in Buddhism, Yin and Yang, and in various forms in Prehistoric and Celtic Art. The use of the symbol of the circle (dragon biting its tail) to suggest completion and perfection is also a simplification of the Hindu spiral, which asserts that nothing returns exactly to its point of departure.

54. Note that Miller says "joy" and not happiness or wisdom. Joy has religious and sacred overtones. It speaks to ecstasy. The Bible speaks of the "joy of the Holy Ghost." It commands one to "enter into the joy of thy Lord." Christ said, "These things I have spoken unto you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy might be full." Christ is the harbinger of everlasting Joy. Auguste seeks to become first a Christ then a Buddha. The Buddhist Nirvana is also state of pure joy.

55. The state described resembles the epileptic traces Miller experienced throughout his life.

56. Miller inserts several Biblical allusions in this passage. He alludes to the stoning to death of St. Stephen. Miller was born on St. Stephen's Day. Stephen is the patron saint of horses. Auguste is loved by and works only with his horse. Miller's describes the clown's horse as kissing him. There is also an obvious reference to the martyrdom of Christ. Another symbol evoked in the butcher's block is the Old Testament sacrificial altar. The patron saint of the circus, clowns and wandering troubadours/poets is Saint Julian the Poor whose church, facing Nôtre Dame, Miller visited often in Paris. Flaubert wrote a story based on Julian's life.

The white horse is also a cryptic allusion to Christ riding a white horse on the day of judgment:

> And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. (Revelation. 19:11)

The white horse was the traditional mount of Sagittarius. Previously this sign was that of the Centaur, the image Miller would use to describe his hero-narrator in his novels. The Centaur is also another of the symbols of Christ. In *Esoteric Astrology* by Alice Bailey we get a

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glimpse of another layer, relevant to Miller's work:

> This earlier sign of the Centaur stood for the evolution and the development of the human soul, with its human objectives, its selfishness; its identification with form, its desire and its aspirations. The Archer on the white horse, which is the more strictly Aryan symbol for this sign, signifies the orientation of the man towards a definite goal. The man is then not part of the horse but is freed from identification with it and is the controlling factor. The definite goal of the Centaur, which is the satisfaction of desire and animal incentives, becomes in the later stages the goal of initiation, which meets with satisfaction in Capricorn, after the preliminary work has been done in Sagittarius. The keynote of the Centaur is ambition. The keynote of the Archer is aspiration and direction, and both are expressions of human goals but one is of the personality and the other of the soul. From ambition to aspiration, from selfishness to an intense desire for selflessness, from individual one-pointed self-interest in Leo to the one-pointedness of the disciple in Sagittarius and thence to initiation in Capricorn.

As mentioned above, in medieval symbolism the transversal of the line between Cancer and Capricorn imitates the passion and illumination of Christ. Miller used this symbolism for his own *Tropic* books.

57. With this image, Miller alludes to the life of Siddhartha, the Buddha who received enlightenment while meditating under the Bodhi tree. This links Miller to Herman Hesse and *Siddhartha*, one of his favorite books. Hesse had dedicated the book to one of Miller's favorite writers, Romain Rolland, who was famous for his interest in India. Rolland was a biographer of Gandhi. Miller shared the immersion of Rolland and Hesse in Indian and Hindu culture.

58. Miller makes many allusions here. One allusion is to the circus net of the trapeze artist. There is also the space/time continuum idea of Einstein. A web of infinite duration protects Auguste. He is held as in a state of timelessness. The most important reference is to the web of infinite duration. In Hinduism the web and the spider are linked to the universal divine. Ramakrishna (who Miller read extensively in 1941) remarked:

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The Vedas compare creation to a spider's web that the spider creates and then lies within. God is both the container of the universe and what is contained in it.

The "Shukla Yajur Veda," of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, states:

> Even as airy threads come from a spider, or small sparks come from a fire, so from *atman,* the Spirit in man, come all the powers of life, all the worlds, all the Gods, all beings. To know the *atman* is to know the mystery of the *Upanishads,* the Truth of truth. The powers of life are truth and their Truth is *atman,* the Spirit.

The spider and web are wonderful symbols of Hindu belief because the spider creates the thread, spits it out and then eats it back again during the process of creating his web. He both creates from himself and can withdraw back into himself all that he has created. The web is also linked to the Hindu notion of the web of destiny or fate. Miller had read Max Heindel's Rosicrucian book *The Web of Destiny.* In this he found:

> There are various grades of spiritual sight. One grade enables a man to see the ordinarily invisible ether with the myriad of beings that invest that realm. Other and higher variants give him the faculty to see the desire world and even the world of thought while remaining in the physical body. But these faculties, though valuable when exercised under full control of the human will, are not sufficient to read the 'MEMORY OF NATURE' with absolute accuracy. To do this and to make the necessary investigations in order that one may understand how the 'Web of Destiny' is made and unmade, it is necessary to be able at will to step from the physical body and function outside in that soul body which we have spoken of as composed of the two higher ethers, this being also invested with the desire body and the mind. Thus the investigator is in full possession of all his faculties, he knows all that he knew in the physical world, and has the ability to bring back into the physical consciousness the things which he has learned without… It is not enough to be able to step outside the body into

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> another world and to see things there; we do not by that fact become omniscient any more than we understand what everything is used for and how everything works here in this physical world because we live here from day to day and year to year. It requires study and application to become thoroughly familiar with the facts of the invisible world as it does with the facts of the world in which we are not living in our physical bodies. Therefore the book, the 'Memory of Nature,' is not read easily at the first attempt or at the second either, for just as it takes a child time to learn how to read our ordinary books here, so, also, it requires time and effort to decipher this wonderful scroll.

This describes, in part, the journey Auguste is undertaking.

Buddhists would liken the story of Auguste to the parable of Lord Buddha and a man named Kandata (or Gaddato in some versions). Kandata had done only ill in his life and was consequently in Hell. In the Buddhist Heaven, the pond covered with lotus was directly above Hell. By looking through the waters one could see Hell below. Buddha saw Kandata suffering and recalled the time that the evil man had shown compassion: the day he almost stepped on a spider and decided to spare him because the spider was weak and an innocent. Buddha decided that this good deed was enough to save him. Buddha took the thread from a spider in Heaven and dropped the thread through the waters of the pond down into the depths of Hell. Kandata grabbed it and began to climb. As he climbed others tried to follow him. He pushed them away saying that the thread was his and only he might climb. In the confusion he fell back into Hell, where he remained. This parallel shows how Kandata condemned himself to Hell because his selfishness negated his enlightened act. It also shows how the Buddha is powerless to help those who are in the depths of illusion or selfishness. Only infinite compassion can lead to Paradise. Kandata also fell back to Hell because he lost faith in the thread to hold him with the weight of the others that sought to follow him. He also ignored the inter-connectivity of all things. He lost Paradise by succumbing to illusion, fear and greed.

In the *Garland Sutra*, we have a description of Indra's Net. Indra's Net is a God in the form of a spider's web covering infinite space.

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Located at each junction of thread is a pearl. In any one of these one can see the reflection of the whole. What is visible in one can be seen in all and vice versa. This expresses the Buddhist notion that everything in creation impacts and is inter-related with every thing and everyone else. Thus we must look out for not only ourselves, but also everything in creation. This idea was what Thoreau called "the infinite extent of our relations." Each object *is* both itself and everything else. In Buddhist terms "in every particle of dust there are Buddhas without number." These ideas find parallels in the ideas of Einstein and modern particle physics. When Auguste "fragments" he joins with the infinite, hence the timeless, divine. Auguste as individual is "blanked out" by union with all creation. Thus he cannot die except to the world of illusion.

59. Gautama Buddha owned a white horse called Kankathaka. Shakyamuni Buddha suffered enormous persecutions during his life. For ninety days he was forced to eat horse fodder. The cradle of Chinese Buddhism is the White Horse Temple near Luoyang. Two Indian monks carried a statue of the Buddha and the sutras to this place by means of a white horse. Thus a white horse, for the Chinese, is associated with their discovery of Buddhism. Among the attributes known as the Seven Jewels of Royal Power, which symbolize secular rule for Buddhists, one is the Precious Horse. This is a white horse that can, like Buddha, rise above the clouds. He can free himself of all the cares of worldly existence.

60. This refers to both the idea that in every grain of dust there are innumerable Buddhas and to the Christian notion that man was formed of dust: hence he has returned to his base and humble origins. In Psalms we find "my soul cleaveth unto the dust." Christian and Jewish dust symbols emphasize negation and nothingness, the least of things. Yet it was the substance from which God formed man. Buddhist dust symbols hold no negative connotations. To Buddhists, dust can be infinite filled with compassion and awareness since it contains enlightenment and is part of us all.

61. The name Antoine is often loosely associated with clowns in French culture. This includes the character from Truffault's series of 1960s films. Antoine Watteau is famous for his depictions of clowns.

62. This image repeats an act Miller often performed. He frequently had dreams of looking in a mirror and not recognizing himself. He also liked to sit in front of a mirror and clown. We can witness this in

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Robert Snyder's film. It emphasizes the notion of schizophrenia that Miller often toyed with. Speaking to Durrell about his fame and its effect on his young children, Miller had said: "I act like a clown, a crackpot, and, as much as I can, I hide my 'celebrity' from them." (Cited in Brassaï, *Henry Miller—Happy Rock*). Miller called Irving Stettner "a phallic clown." It could have been applied to him. Henry Miller, Fred Perlès, Wambly Bald and Fraenkel, when joking around in Paris, used to refer to each other as "Joey." This is a reference to famous clown Joseph Grimaldi. Joey is a synonym for clown. Miller and Fred would act out routines where one of them would take on the role of an Auguste clown. They called this "taking the lead." In *Sexus*, Miller wrote:

> Once upon a time I had thought I might make a good clown. There was a chap in school who passed as my twin brother; we were very close to one another and later, when we had graduated, we formed a club of twelve, which we called the Xerxes Society. We two possessed all the initiative—the others were just so much slag and driftwood. In desperation sometimes George Marshall and I would perform for the others, an impromptu clowning which kept the others in stitches. Later I used to think of these moments as-having quite a tragic quality. The dependency of the others was really pathetic: it was a foretaste of the general inertia and apathy, which I was to encounter all through life.

63. Thus, Miller associates Time with Evil and Illusion, with Maia. Timelessness is associated with the divine (reference to Edward Carpenter *The Secret of Time and Satan*).

64. The implication is that the circus, just like the world it symbolizes, needs a scapegoat or a Christ to take up its burdens and provide relief.

65. The albatross is an allusion to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," which echoes Buddhist teachings, and to Baudelaire's "The Albatross." Baudelaire likens the poet to both an albatross and a clown. It alludes also to Cendrars' "La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France." The albatross is the poet who can only function in his true atmosphere—the heavens, just as the clown can only function in the ring. Symbolic birds were common in art in Miller's time,

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such as the work of Brancusi, Braque, Picasso, and Cocteau. "Proper bounds" suggests Baudelaire's poem where the albatross is tricked outside his element to end up walking impotent and crippled on the deck among the sailors. Both the albatross image and image of dog barking at the moon were reinforced by Miller's recent reading of *Maldoror*.

66. This and further comments by Miller on Fowlie are cited in "Clowns & Angels: An Appreciation," from *Chimera* autumn 1944 pp. 47-8. Wallace Fowlie: *Letters of Henry Miller and Wallace Fowlie 1943-72* (Grove 1975) traces their relationship.

67. Henri Peyre *Writers and Critics: A Study of Misunderstanding* (Cornell U.P. 1944). Later, Peyre *The Failure of Criticism* (Cornell U.P. 1967).

68. Henry Miller in "What India Means to Me," *Kaiser-I-Hind* (January 9th 1949).

69. During the break-up of this relationship Miller read Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélie*, which impacted him profoundly.

70. Léger and Miller were friends for many years. Miller wrote a preface to an edition of Rimbaud illustrated by Léger: *Les illuminations,* Arthur Rimbaud, Grosclaude Editions (Lausanne 1949). Miller owned some artwork by Léger, which he sold after the death of the painter in 1955. Miller used this money to take his family for a tour of Europe. Miller had known of Léger since at least the 1920s, from his art and from his involvement with Antheil and the *Ballet Méchanique*.

71. *Hamlet* has a famous grave scene where clowns appear.

72. *Tropic of Cancer* was called *The New Instinctivist Bible* in Miller's notes.

73. In his reference to the Hindu goddess, Miller links the vision of Kali with the violence and destructiveness of the feminine principle. The moon represents Kali. This draws an obvious parallel with the clown Auguste's aspiration to unite with the moon or the feminine, to be assimilated by Kali who is both pure destruction and pure creation. Kali is ambivalent to suffering, like nature.

74. *Remember to Remember* was originally called *The Egg in its Prison*.

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75. *The Time of the Assassins* was written at high speed. He wrote the book in two parts. The first part (second in the published book) was 75 pages and written in May and early June 1945.

76. *The New York Times*, March 4th 1956.

77. "Charity," in the sense of the King James Bible. He meant, "love." This is a reference to the Book of Corinthians and to God as pure love.

78. Miller had been an admirer of Ramakrishna and his disciple Vivekananda since his teens. He read the *Gospel of Ramakrishna* again during his "Air-Conditioned Nightmare" trip. A quote from Ramakrishna began the book. Miller noted on a copy of the gospel give to Huntington Cairns that this reading of Ramakrishna was more valuable to him than a year of traveling throughout America.

79. We see here one of the many offers Miller made to friends to join him in Big Sur. Similar offers were made to Perlès, Durrell, Pelorsen and Emil White and others. Only Moricand accepted.

80. Miller told Blaise Cendrars that he read *Siddhartha* in German. He saw in this character an acceptance of life that paralleled Cendrars. Cendrars, in turn, denied he was Buddhist, but said he was Hindu, a Brahmin. Cendrars was an old friend of Fernand Léger. They had worked together on both books and a ballet, with another mutual friend, composer Darius Milhaud.

81. Miller in spring 1945 read Franz Werfel's *Star of the Unborn*, a book that was obsessed with angels.

82. Miller attempted to translate Rimbaud, sometimes with Lepska's help, in January-March 1945.

83. Fowlie drew a parallel between Miller and his Yale colleague, Jewish metaphysician, Paul Weiss. Miller admitted they had many similarities but Miller rejected Weiss because Weiss represented the logical side of his mind that Miller was striving to repress.

84. Miller tried to place Fowlie's book *The Clown's Grail* with his friend at *Circle*, George Leite.

85. A list of Fowlie's writings about Miller is given in Lawrence J. Shifreen *Henry Miller: A Bibliography of Secondary Sources* (Scarecrow

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1979). Miller reviewed Fowlie's book *Clowns and Angels* in *Chimera* III (autumn 1944). Fowlie wrote on Miller in *Accent Quarterly* (1944), Bern Porter's *Happy Rock* (1945), Oscar Baradinsky's *Of, by & about Henry Miller* (1945), *The Clown's Grail* (1947), *Age of Surrealism* (1950) and *Love in Literature* (1965). He also reviewed *The Time of the Assassins* and *Big Sur & the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*. Fowlie was not only a personal friend of Miller but also a staunch champion of the literary value of his work. Fowlie is one of the great critics and translators of French literature of the mid-Twentieth Century. His work ranges from studies of Mallarmé and Rimbaud to Cocteau, and French novels. He had a particular interest in angels, clown and symbolic and religious literature.

86. Miller refers to Perlès as a clown in *Remember to Remember*, *Joey* and several other texts.

87. See Claude Simon *Bérénice's Golden Mane* (Alyscamps Press 1998), which was written (1984) in response to paintings by Miró.

88. For a discussion of Bosch's symbols and how they relate to Miller, see the reference in note 6.

89. Georges Rouault, *Pages sceptiques: de la béatitude des ventres pleins et des cerveaux vides*, Drouot catalogue, Paris June 11th 1956. Henry Miller read several books by Rouault, including *Paysages légendaries*, *Souvenirs intimes* and *Divertissement*.

90. Bloy wrote about Rouault in his published *Journal*. In November 1945 Miller asked Fowlie to send him books by Bloy. Miller had wanted to read Bloy for several years and mentioned him in *Remember to Remember*.

91. Rouault's comments remind us of Shakespeare's King Lear and his Fool.

92. Jacques-Benigue Bossuet (1627-1704) was a Catholic Bishop, famous moralist, brilliant orator and writer. He believed in absolutism and the divine right of kings. He advocated unity of all the Christian churches under a Catholic doctrine, and was a bitter opponent of Protestantism.

93. For example in *Halls Spectacles* (August 14th 1947) or *L'Avenir* (January 1st 1948). Readers of Ionesco's novel *The Hermit* might be

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reminded of Miller. It begins: "At thirty-five, it's high time to quit the rat race. Assuming there is a rat race. I was sick and tired of my job. It was already late: I was fast approaching forty." Miller wrote a long and complimentary essay on Ionesco in *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird* (1962).

94. Henry Miller insisted on reading his correspondence with Fowlie before it was published and almost certainly demanded several excisions, as he regularly did. An interesting example of an omission is that Barney Rosset of Grove Press receives just a glancing mention in the published letters. In fact, Fowlie was Rosset's mentor and literary advisor, the man who helped convince him to publish *Waiting for Godot* and encouraged him to publish Miller.

95. Ian MacNiven *The Durrell-Miller Letters* (Faber & Faber 1988).

96. An early article drawing parallels between Miller's writing and the musical scores of Mozart was published in Paris, in *La Bataille* (August 20th 1947).

97. Tilyou was one of the founders of Coney Island amusements, such as Steeplechase Park and the Ferris Wheel. He was a consummate showman and entrepreneur.

98. There is an ironic allusion here to Per Lagerkvist's 1920 novel *The Eternal Smile*, in which the characters live in the world of the dead and seek an explanation from God, who turns out to be fallible. Miller contrasts this toothy American smile to the Eternal Smile of the Buddha. By showing their teeth (and maybe fangs) when they smile, Americans, Miller hints, show the savagery and violence that lays hidden behind their seeming good humor. It also likens them to chimps. (Henry Miller, *Black Spring*).

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Once again, Karl Orend demonstrates why he is the most perceptive reader of Henry Miller. In *Henry Miller's Angelic Clown*, Orend provides the first extended analysis of Miller's densely allusive *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. Orend brilliantly unravels the biographical, spiritual, and artistic threads of Miller's narrative. He allows readers to comprehend, finally, the complexities of a deceptively simple story that has been overlooked by all previous critics and yet forms a major staging post in Henry Miller's life's work. Ranging from Miller's early readings in Hindu and Buddhist literature and philosophy to Miller's relationship with Wallace Fowlie and French art, Karl Orend positions *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* as a key text for understanding Henry Miller's quest for Apocatastasis.

—James M. Decker,
author of *Henry Miller and Narrative Form: Constructing the Self, Rejecting Modernity*

Author Biography

Karl Orend was for ten years manager of Shakespeare & Company in Paris. He is also a translator and founder and editorial director of Alyscamps Press. Karl has written and edited several books, including *Henry Miller's Red Phoenix: A Lawrentian Quest* (2006), *The Brotherhood of Fools and Simpletons: Gods and Devils in Henry Miller's Utopia* (2005), *On the 70th Anniversary of* Tropic of Cancer (2004), and *Cathedral of Light: Betty Ryan at the Villa Seurat* (2003). He has contributed to many leading publications, including the *TLS*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Café in Space*, and *Fine Books and Collections*. He is one of the world's leading authorities on Henry Miller and was an Andrew Mellon Research Fellow at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. He is a former member of the Advisory Board of the Henry Miller Memorial Library and European Editor of *Nexus: The International Henry Miller Journal*.

Henry Miller's Angelic Clown

Reflections on
The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder

was published, in Paris,
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